



A MACNAUGHTON
CASTLE ROMANCE
BOOK THREE

AUBREY
WYNNE



A Bonny Pretender

**A MacNaughton Castle Romance
Book Three**

By
Aubrey Wynne



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Prologue

Dancing with the Devil

Late summer 1806

Castle Raygin, Northern England

Frank's head snapped back, absorbing the impact from the blacksmith's blow. A fast right, and he rebounded with a punch to the older man's gut. A quiet *oomph* from the giant made Frank grin with satisfaction.

"Ye're doin' well, Master Francis," rumbled Smythe as their weekly bout ended. "A strappin' young lad of thirteen with fists of steel. Another year or two, and I'd bet on ye myself."

"I won't be in a ring fighting for brass." Frank held out his arms while Smythe's young son removed the gloves. "But I do intend to be ready for the day I confront my father."

"Careful there, lad. His Lordship has a temper and a mean streak ye don't want to be courtin'. Ye might make matters worse for Lady Raines." Smythe handed him a towel to wipe the sweat from his brow. "Boxing is a good skill for any man traveling the roads to London these days. Those highway culls are gettin' bolder every year, and the city streets ain't no better."

Frank took his time on the way home, allowing his linen shirt to dry while he walked. He entered the woods that separated the estate from the village and stopped a moment to let his eyes adjust to the dimness. The scent of pine and decaying leaves tickled his nostrils, while the dappled shade cooled his skin. He peered up at a red squirrel perched on a spindly evergreen limb, the tufts on its ears trembling as it chattered nervously at him. It dashed off when a redstart landed on a nearby branch; the bird's red-orange tail feathers quivered as its shiny black eyes focused on the human intruder.

"Not to worry, little ones. I'm not here to harm you."

This was his sanctuary. The smells, the sounds, the peace of his little forest had been a refuge for him since the age of five. He hovered at the other side, hesitant to emerge onto the vast lawn of the mansion. It was still early morning, and his father would be in his study or eating

breakfast.

Several men worked with long, curved scythes, clipping the grass. They worked quickly, only stopping to mop their foreheads or rake the cuttings into piles. A smaller boy held an iron peg with a handle and followed behind. He jabbed it into the ground with one hand and yanked out a rogue daisy. The viscount would refuse to pay their wage if even one daisy or weed was missed. The old nobleman would walk the lawn, looking for any imperfection, and harangue the steward if he found one. Lord Raines was a perfectionist and controlled his realm with a heavy hand. *Meticulous* was the word his mother used. Frank preferred *malicious* and *unyielding*.

Either way, Lord Raines expected a flawless performance—on any given task—from everyone and everything around him. His standards were so high, Frank doubted His Majesty could meet such requirements. He dragged his feet across the yard and snuck in through the kitchen. Cook smiled at him and tossed him a biscuit, along with a wink. He dipped it into a bowl of butter on the table, bit into the still-warm treat, and took the back stairs two at a time. It would only irk the viscount if Frank wasn't dressed properly for breakfast.

"I don't know why you need to go to London. Have a modiste come here for fittings," complained Lord Raines as Frank entered the morning room. "It's not as if you have a dozen pressing invitations and need a wardrobe right away."

"I only thought—"

"Therein lies the problem, woman." The viscount squinted at his wife, his advanced age showing in the deep creases around his pale green eyes and mouth. "How many times have I told you that I will do the thinking? Do you know better than your husband, your lord and master?"

Lady Raines swallowed and shook her head, embarrassment creeping up her neck. She lowered her soft brown eyes to her lap, nervously picking at a thread on her daffodil muslin gown. A slender finger tucked a long, stray curl behind her ear, adding to the thick waves of golden blonde spread across her shoulders. Another source of humiliation the viscount insisted on. He wanted her tresses loose and free, if no guests were expected, and all visits were approved by him first.

"I didn't think so. You'll remain here, and I'll have a dressmaker summoned." Raines nodded at his son. "I'm glad you finally roused yourself to join us. 'A lazy man is a poor man,' so my grandfather always said."

Frank clenched his fists at his sides and arranged his face into an expression of indifference. He filled his lungs and let the breath out slowly to ease his irritation. Any reaction would delight the viscount and aim his vehemence at the next victim. No use baiting the bear. Not that Lord Raines ever laid a hand on either of them. His mouth was a lethal weapon, sharpened to a knife's edge and polished over the years. He could slice a man open with look or gut him with a few words.

And never blink.

"Good morning, sir." His father wasn't privy to the early morning sessions in the village, so Frank ignored the jab. Stopping next to his mother's chair, he bent to kiss her cheek and give her shoulder a sympathetic squeeze. "My apologies if I'm late."

His appetite gone, Frank settled for another biscuit and marmalade and chewed in silence. He concentrated on the dough between his teeth, squeezing out a drop of anger each time his teeth pressed together. Smythe was right. Losing his temper wouldn't help his mother.

"I spoke with your tutor yesterday. He was quite impressed with your debate skills and, when given a chance to prepare, your arguments were well presented and intelligent." Raines smirked. "Of course, *my* son would need time to prepare. No one will ever accuse you of a quick wit."

Frank's chest constricted as the knot in his belly tightened. He pulled on his cravat, biting back the words that lay on the tip of his tongue.

Don't be goaded. Think of Mama.

"Yet, the man was impressed with Francis' skill," Lady Raines pointed out softly, smiling at her son. "I'm so proud of you."

"Well, I'm not!" The viscount aimed an accusing finger at his heir. "You were convincing in your arguments, he said. Defended the rabble of this country and rejected our justice system. You impudent, little waif."

"Father, a man shouldn't be hung because he picked someone's pockets, or a child die because he stole a loaf of bread." Frank closed his eyes and took another deep breath, realizing his mistake. When he opened them, the fury of his father's sea-green glare hit him like a physical slap.

Blast! Why had he taken the bait?

"Are you arguing with me?" Raines stood and threw down his napkin. "Stand, boy!" He walked to Frank's chair.

He obliged and inwardly chuckled at the hesitation in the old man when Frank straightened to his full height. He was now as tall as his

father and would soon overtake him. Probably the only thing he had in common with this man was the blood running through their veins. Frank had inherited his mother's fair hair and complexion. According to her, he would be tall and lanky like his grandfather. Even fate knew better than to create another vicious viscount.

"Father, I did my best to complete the assignment. Please don't take it as an assault against you or your beliefs." His mother's eyes were bright with panic; he'd try to defuse his father's anger. "Next time, I'll take the side that reflects your opinions."

"An assault on *my* beliefs?" Raines hissed. "We are of noble blood. Our family name has been respected since the Tudors claimed the throne. *My* opinion will be *your* opinion. You will not besmirch our reputation with radical views."

Frank was surprised by the fury trembling within him. The older he got, the harder it was to contain his temper.

"Do. You. Understand?" Raines prodded a finger into Frank's chest with each word.

"My lord," intervened his mother, "the boy—"

"Shut your mouth, you insipid, Friday-faced chit." His venom spat across the table. "I've had to endure a frigid wife who could give me but one babe. At least it was a male, though I question how much of a man he'll turn out to be."

Something inside Frank snapped. He pulled back fist and smashed it into his father's face. The viscount stumbled backward, then fell to the floor with a curse. He lay stunned on the Axminster carpet, a red stain slowly seeping from his nose to the expensive silk of his pristine white cravat. A malevolent smile curled his lip.

"Perhaps there's a man inside there after all," Lord Raines said with a grunt.

"Oh, my lord, let me help you," cried Lady Raines, rushing to his side.

He waved her away and glared up at his son. "You'll pay for this, boy."

"I've been paying since the day I was born." Frank recognized the fear in his father's eyes. *Good*, he thought, then turned on his heel and left the dining room.

His heart raced, the pulse drumming in his throat. What had he done? What price would he and his mother pay? He rubbed the knuckles on his right hand. It had been worth it. A moment he would never forget. The viscount would fire the tutor. The one person, besides his

mother, who had always been supportive and encouraging in Frank's short life.

Later that night, his mother tapped softly at his door. He tightened the belt of his banyan and bade her enter. There were shadows beneath her eyes, but she wore a bright smile.

"I'm surprised you can look so happy after your son planted a facer on your husband." He sprawled across a leather chair in front of the fireplace. When he looked up again, he saw the tears sparkling in her eyes. "I'm sorry if you've suffered from my actions, but I don't regret it."

"Nor do I," she whispered, then cleared her throat. "You're going to Eton. You will leave next week."

"Eton? I'm being sent off to school?" Incredible. His father had insisted a tutor would be better until he was old enough to attend Oxford. His pulse raced. This had to be a cruel trick to fill him with hope and snatch it away, his father's favorite form of retribution.

She nodded. "I convinced him that you need to learn how to be a gentleman, as he did, by formal schooling. It wasn't your fault, what happened today, only a lack of education."

Freedom. Sweet freedom. He leaped from the chair with a loud howl and hugged his mother close. She was a petite woman, only coming to his chest, but there was strength in her returned embrace.

"I will miss you," she mumbled into his robe, "but it's for the best. It's the only way I can protect you."



May 1811
Eton Boys' School
Windsor, England

"He's gone." She smiled, then remembered herself and studied her soft leather shoes. "A fever finally took him last week. I thought I'd tell you in person rather than a letter."

Frank stared at his mother. His father was dead. And his mother had never looked so alive. Her once-pale skin glowed with health, her eyes bright, and her tone was light. He understood the feeling, had experienced it himself when he came here to Eton. Freedom was a giddy sensation.

"Are you all right?"

She nodded and sat down, grasping his hand to pull him down

beside her. “You are now the viscount, Lord Raines. There’s much for you to learn, but you must still attend Oxford, of course. Or Cambridge. It’s up to you, now. You can make your own choices.”

The excitement in her voice was unmistakable. She put into words the thoughts revolving in both their heads.

“Our lives have finally begun.”

Chapter One

Tantrums, Tirades, and a Truce

January 1820

*MacNaughton Castle, Dunderave
The Highlands of Scotland*

Brigid MacNaughton notched the arrow, slowly pulled back till the tension was just right, then let it fly. It landed in the center of the circle with a *thunk*. Young Liam ran to the tree and yanked the arrow from its trunk.

“That was a braw shot, Miss Brigid,” he said, blowing a strand of copper hair out of his light green eyes. “Ye’ll teach me how to do that?”

“Aye.” She adjusted her plaid and reached down to scratch Brownie’s head. The deerhound whined and thumped her tail. “But remember our deal.”

The almost six-year-old nodded, his expression serious. “I promise to take good care of yer hound while ye’re away. But why do ye have to go? I’ll miss ye.” He hugged Brigid’s waist tightly. “Ye’re like a sister to me, ye ken.”

“And ye’re like a wee brother to me,” she agreed and cupped his freckled cheek. “Sometimes we have to do what’s best for others rather than ourselves. My ma thinks I should go to London for a bit and learn how to be a fine lady.”

His thick brows furrowed. “Ye care about being a fine lady?”

“No’ at all, but since it makes her happy, I’ve agreed to it.”

“After a temper tantrum, tirade, and all bargaining got ye nowhere,” a deep voice teased from behind.

“Brodie, how do ye do that? I swear ye’ve a lighter step than the faeries.” Her breath came out in white puffs as she admonished her brother. Brigid hated being startled. Over the years, it had become one of her brother’s favorite games. “Do ye remember the time ye snuck up on me and Kirsty at the dyeing tubs? I’d have thought ye’d learned a lesson from that.”

“My backside was a lovely indigo for nye on a month. I had to

lengthen my kilt like some feeble old mon to cover it.” Brodie frowned, but his blue eyes, the MacNaughton sapphire blue all the siblings shared, glinted with humor. “For yer information, I did learn my lesson. Now, I always assess my environment before stalking my prey.”

Brigid scowled and punched his arm. Next to Kirsty, Brodie’s wife, he was her best friend. They were closest in age out of the four MacNaughton siblings, with Brigid the youngest. She loved all three of her brothers, but she and Brodie had a special bond. Their ma said when she’d been a babe, only he could calm her. Because of this, he’d been dubbed the unofficial bearer of all unpleasant news when it pertained to Brigid.

“I’ll remember to tell Kirsty that we’ll have to share our secrets in precarious surroundings then.” That reminded her of her sister-in-law’s bout of sickness. “How is she doing? Feeling any better?”

He nodded, a black curl falling across his forehead. “Aye, she’s no’ as peely-wally this afternoon. I asked her if ye cooked for her. That would assault *my* stomach.” He jumped away from the second slap and did a little jig. “Ye’ll have to be quicker than that, oh sister mine.”

“I’m surprised ye can move that fast, carrying such a large ego.” Brigid *tsked* with satisfaction at the returning glare. “It must be quite the burden, poor mon.”

“Are ye learning how to defend the clan and castle, lad?” Brodie asked the boy instead of his usual witty retort.

“Aye, sir. I want to surprise my da when we go hunting again.”

“Weel, ye’re a quick learner, and my sister is an excellent teacher. But time’s no’ on yer side.” He gave Brigid a side glance. “She’ll be leaving next month.”

Her heart pounded in her ears. “Next month? I thought the *Season*,” she said with a sneer, “began in April?”

“Around Easter, I’m told,” he agreed. “Aunt Maeve says ye’ll be needing a...”

She folded her arms across her chest, her boot thumping dully on the snow. Yes, she wanted to intimidate the muttonhead and stall whatever bad news he was about to impart. Apprehension skittered up her spine.

“A wardrobe.” He turned, hoisted Liam up on his shoulder, and took a long step back. “Careful of the child.”

“Liam canna protect ye from my temper.” She wagged a finger.

“Of course no’,” agreed Liam, a slow grin curving his mouth. “No’ til I’ve learned archery, anyway.”

The knot in her stomach twisted. Lace and silk and shoes that were

as practical as a daily bath. She remembered one of the fine English nobles living on the estate nearby had insisted on that. No wonder he had so many wrinkles by the time he left. Brigid always secretly thought he was trying to wipe the stench of the Scots off him. She giggled, but the sound faded. Brodie had that so-far-so-good expression on his face. The knot tightened.

“What are ye leaving out?” She narrowed her eyes at him when he feigned an innocent look. “I ken ye too well, so ye might as well tell me now. I can scream like a banshee here or in the castle. It’s up to you, brother.”

“What’s a banshee sound like?” asked Liam. He put a hand on Brodie’s thick, dark hair and hopped down. “Like the sow when ye get too close to her piglets? Or more like Widow Weir when she has too much whisky at a ceilidh?”

Brigid and Brodie guffawed.

“The Widow Weir only cackles when she indulges, but if ye call her a banshee, ye might hear what they sound like.” Brodie wrapped an arm around the boy’s neck and rubbed his head with his knuckles. The boy let out a howl. “That’s more like a banshee but louder.”

“Add the sow’s squeal and ye’ve got an idea. It’s a sad wailing that puts the hairs up on the back of yer neck. Supposed to be an omen of coming death,” added Brigid.

“Have ye ever heard one?” the lad asked Brodie, his eyes wide.

“Every time Brigid’s been told *no*,” Brodie whispered loudly, then took off at a gallop, grinning over his shoulder. “Race ye to the stable.”

They’d finish this conversation, Brigid thought. She hiked up her skirts, clutched the bow, and flew down the hill, Brownie on her heels. A spray of snow followed in their wake, a boy’s giggle and a dog’s bark echoing over the glen. Liam gave up, his short legs unable to keep up, and threw himself to the ground to roll down instead. They all stopped at the bottom, panting and grinning at each other. She helped the lad brush the snow off his wool trousers, then shook her own skirts.

Life was good here, and she was content. Would London have a place to run? To breathe in the fresh morning air and listen to the sounds of God’s creatures? She loved the Highlands and the drafty old castle. The land and stone were in her blood, part of her soul. How would she survive months in a dirty, crowded, smelly city?



Brigid settled on the thick wool rug before the hearth and laid her head on her mother's lap. Glynnis smiled down at her as she continued her needlework. "Ye look lovely with the fire shining on those red-brown curls. My hair was just as thick and nearly the same color when I was yer age."

"Except ye were married and having yer first bairn at nineteen." Marriage seemed so daunting to Brigid. "I've eliminated every possibility from here to Edinburgh."

Glynnis chuckled. "That's a wee exaggeration, lass. To be fair, ye scared half of them away."

"Ye want me to change who I am so I can find a husband? Bite my tongue and pretend to be someone else for the rest of my life?" That had to be the worst advice any mother had ever given a daughter. "Are ye ashamed of me?"

Her mother gasped, then frowned. She set her sewing on her lap and stroked Brigid's hair. "I'm as proud of ye as I am of all my sons. Sending ye off is breaking my heart, but I think it will be a good experience for ye. I ken that ye dinna understand my motive, but I'll try again to explain it."

Brigid closed her eyes, her mother's soothing fingers against her scalp calming the uncertainty in her belly. "Ye want me to be happy. I understand that. But I dinna see how London can help me find a husband here in Scotland."

"I believe the company ye will keep, and the social graces ye learn, will smooth yer jagged edges. Ye're a rough-cut diamond that only needs a bit of polishing. It's my fault, of course. When yer da died, I didn't have the heart to tell ye 'no.' Ye were such a tomboy and preferred to be with yer brothers over helping me." Glynnis sighed. "Then all at once ye were a grown woman, and I'd let ye down."

"Ma, how can ye say that? Ye raised four bairns without a husband."

"And lost one. I couldna birth or bury my children without the help of my parents and the entire clan." She sighed, grief darkening her blue eyes.

Brigid laid her cheek back against the soft wool of her mother's skirt. If only time could have stopped a year ago, when the world had been such a rosy place. Her brother Ian had still been alive, newly married, with nothing but opportunity before him. Until he'd attended a political gathering last summer and was killed in the massacre to disperse it.

“I havena prepared ye for the life a woman must lead. We have a complicated role in a world dominated by men. Ye must learn to compromise, be mindful of a man’s ego. Ye’ll get yer way more often when ye convince him that yer idea was his idea.” She chuckled. “We’re magical creatures, ye ken.”

Brigid grinned with her eyes still closed. “Ye mean I canna demand from my husband as I do from my brothers.”

“That’s part of it. I want ye to be the person ye’ve always been, only a wee softer to start out. Learn to curb yer impulsiveness. Ye seem to be on a mission to scare away any suitors, and I dinna think ye even realize it. Ye confront every mon who smiles at ye, speaking yer mind with no thought of the consequences.” She tipped Brigid’s chin up to look her in the eye. “Everything in life is not a battle, a need for ye to have the upper hand. There will even be times when giving in is a way to victory.”

“I never give up at anything,” grumbled Brigid.

“Aye, I’ve doctored enough of yer scrapes and bruises to vouch for that. But I said ‘give in’ not ‘give up.’ There’s a difference, and I’ve seen ye do it with young Liam.” Glynnis leaned her head back and stared into the crackling embers of peat, lost in thought. “If ye dinna let a mon get close, how will he ken if he likes ye?”

Her voice had an odd, faraway tone, as if she were no longer speaking to Brigid but thinking to herself.

“Ma?” Brigid wondered where her mother’s mind had wandered. She had her suspicions.

“A *bhobain*. My dear, sweet, obstinate child. I love ye so and want ye to be happy. And I dinna think ye can do that without bairns of yer own.”

Brigid shook her head. “I have a family. Lachlan and Brodie will give ye grandchildren, and my nieces and nephews will fill my time.”

Her mother sighed, her eyes mirroring her concern. “It’s no’ the same. I see the yearning in yer gaze when ye hold a bairn. Ye’ll need yer own, a brood of them if my hunch is right.”

Brigid snorted. A brood of children. “I canna see myself lumbering around with a big belly and scolding wee ones clinging to my skirts.” Yet, a vision of strawberry-blond toddlers and a babe at her breast hovered at the edge of her mind and stuck.

Saints and sinners! Where did that come from? More surprising, the image didn’t make her stomach clench with anxiety.

“Ye’re a ship at sea, my girl, searching for the light on shore. And

when ye find it, ye'll steer straight for it. Compromise willna seem such a hardship, then." Glynnis smiled. "With my sister as yer sponsor, I believe ye'll learn a great deal from her and her circle."

Aunt Maeve had fallen in love with an English earl, married, and moved away years ago. The two families had started MacNaughton Textiles together, the earl providing funds and her grandfather supplying experience and workers. The earl had died the previous year, and her cousin, Gideon, now held the title. The mill in Glasgow had become one of the main sources of income for the entire clan and the nearby village of Dunderave.

"Lissie will be there." Brigid thought of seeing her brother's widow again and brightened. "I've missed her, though I understand her need to leave. It would be hard to lose yer husband and be surrounded by his family. We're a constant memory."

She also looked forward to seeing her cousin and aunt again but dreaded the events she'd have to attend. And the dresses she must wear. And the washing and pulling of her hair. And the countless tedious conversations with strangers. A moan escaped her lips.

"I dinna see my grandmother bowing to her husband. And he's the clan chief."

"Ha! Ye're right, she was never weak, but her behavior was a wee different when they first met. Yer grandfather was a good mon, but arrogant. She eased her outspoken ways into the marriage."

Brigid tried to imagine her grandmother, docile and playing up to the MacNaughton's ego. She shivered. It must have been a horrible ordeal. Her mother couldn't possibly want her to do that. "So, I need to be an imposter to snare a husband I dinna want."

Glynnis blew out a long breath. "It takes more than determination to control the direction of yer future. A quarrelsome woman will only make her life harder. She needs to be clever, learn how to influence her husband subtly. For the men believe they rule this world, Brigid. Never doubt it." She gently pushed her daughter back and rose from the rocking chair, stretching her arms above her head as she arched her back and stifled a yawn. "But also never doubt that behind every confident mon is an astute woman whispering in his ear."

"Ye want me to whisper?" Brigid giggled, then wrapped her arms around her middle as the laughter took over. Brownie lifted her head from the carpet and gave a howl. "I never mastered that as a child."

"Just wait," said her mother, a smirk curving her lips. "Ye'll surprise yerself at what ye're capable of for the right mon."



Early February 1820

"I can carry it, Miss Brigid," the lad said, pulling the trunk from her grip. He grinned, revealing a missing tooth. "I'll be six this summer, and Da says I'm almost as strong as he is."

"Be careful, now. These old castle steps are narrow and slick."

A long, mournful howl echoed up the stone staircase. Brigid blinked. If only she could bring the deerhound along. It would be a comfort for both of them. She followed the bobbing copper head down the curving stairs, pressing her lips together to hold back the laughter.

Liam took one step and pulled on the trunk. *Thunk!* Another step. *Thunk!* By the time they neared the main floor, the entire family was waiting for them. Brodie and Kirsty, her red hair unbound and gleaming, stood next to Glynnis. Her grandda towered over the group, one arm around his wife's shoulders. Brigid had been his shadow, following him around as a child whenever her brothers had tired of watching over her. Now his black hair was speckled with gray, his handsome face creased with age.

"She'll be a spinster by the time they get to the coach," Brodie whisper-yelled.

Kirsty gave him a sharp elbow.

Young Liam glowered at Brodie. He tried to lift the trunk and carry it down the last few steps. His foot slid off the worn stone, and he and the trunk tumbled to the floor, the old chest breaking his fall.

"See what ye've done," Kirsty hissed at her husband.

"I'm fine. I'm fine," the boy called as Brownie licked his face, which promptly triggered a round of screeching and giggling.

"She's trying to wash those freckles off yer nose," teased Brigid.

Liam scrambled off the luggage, moved a few body parts, and found everything intact. "Och, no. Da says freckles are kisses from the angels, and these come from my own ma. They're as permanent as the sun and the moon, he says."

The boy's mother had died when he was only a bairn. His father, the older Liam, had returned to the Highlands after a failed attempt at crofting. His family had been one of many cleared from their homes when the English landlords turned their lands into grazing pastures. He'd hated the Lowlands and wanted to raise his son as he'd grown up. The MacNaughton women took pity on the poor, lone males and

mothered them both. Brigid and Kirsty provided staples that the women of a household normally prepared, such as butter, bread, and cheese. Glynnis, happy to have a child to take care of again, had become a surrogate mother to the boy.

“No truer words said,” her grandmother agreed, taking the lad’s hand. “Such a wonderful parting gift from a mother to a son.”

Brigid cursed the hot tears that threatened. She would miss the youngster. Who would give her those sloppy, sweet, oh-so-tight hugs every day? She blinked and memorized every detail of the entry hall, then stopped at the receiving room. This was the oldest part of the castle, and she loved every timber and stone. Her grandmother had maintained the original structure, adding modern touches. The floor was no longer covered with rushes but fine wool carpets. Tapestries and banners from clans past and present hung on the granite walls.

“Ye willna be gone forever,” her grandmother said in her ear. “Do ye have yer dried thistle and heather with ye?”

She nodded, not trusting her voice. They were pressed in the bible and stored safely in her trunk. The scent would remind her of home.

“Keep this with ye too. It helped me when I first came here as Calum’s wife. While our ways were the same, all the people and personalities were so verra different.”

Brigid took the small, red velvet bag and opened it with a gasp. “Yer worry stone? But ye’ve always carried this with ye. It’s one of yer favorite possessions.” The stone had come from the Isle of Iona and had been a gift from her mother, Brigid’s great-grandmother.

She nodded. “The rubbing of it will give ye some comfort and ease the agitation ye might feel in yer new surroundings. Its real power is bringing back the memories of home and yer loved ones. That’s what gives ye true solace.”

Brigid threw her arms around her grandmother, pushing back the long auburn braid streaked with gray. “Thank ye, and I’ll keep it with me always.”

“Or until ye come home,” her grandmother reminded her. “Promise me one thing.”

“Anything.”

“Think of this as an adventure. Observe, learn, and grow from it. I imagine ye’ll see some wondrous and some unpleasant things, but take it all in—good and bad.” She cupped Brigid’s cheek. “Dinna forget to see the humor in a situation and laugh often. Most of all, remember we’ll be waiting for ye, missing ye every moment of every day.”

Brigid nodded and gave her one more quick hug before going outside to join the others. Her grandfather wrapped her in his strong arms, and she wiggled her toes as they dangled above the snow. His deerhound, Angus, flopped its long tail against the flagstones.

"If ye need me, just send word. We'll come fetch ye, *mo chridhe*," Calum whispered gruffly in her ear.

She nodded against his wide chest, still muscled from years of hard work. The chest she'd slept on and cried on. A man who'd been both father and grandfather, who'd always made her feel safe and clever and loved. Breathing in the remnants of his last tobacco pipe, she willed herself not to cry until she was out of sight. It would start the whole group bawling and flood the entire glen.

"Give my sister and nephew a hug from me," said her mother. "And two for poor Lissie. Tell her I canna wait to see her again."

With both feet on the ground again, she peered up at the old tower with its rectangular keep. It loomed over the courtyard, casting them in shadow. Brigid had always considered the castle a grand, intimidating structure. Outside, the thick walls dominated the architecture with narrow slits for light on the lower floors and larger windows above. Memories of mock battles with her brothers came flooding back. Good memories. *With more to come*, she reminded herself.

With a final goodbye for everyone, and a special hug for Brownie, she climbed into the carriage. Oh, how she'd prefer to ride her pony astride instead of trapped inside this velvet-and-leather cage.

As they rumbled down the hill, Brigid squeezed her eyes shut. The mournful howl of a deerhound followed; her heart cracked. She opened the shutter and popped her head out the window. Brownie chased after the coach; her pitiful keening finally let loose the flood of emotion Brigid had held back.

"*Fuirich!*" she shouted at the hound. The bundle of gray fur came to a sliding halt and whined. *I canna do this. I canna leave her behind*, her mind screamed as tears soaked her cheeks. Just as Brigid opened her mouth to call the dog forward, Liam came barreling after them.

"Brownie, I'm yer master now." He skidded to a stop and put his arms around the deerhound's neck, burying his face in her wiry coat. "We've got to take care of each other until she comes back home." He stood and pulled on the loose fur around the hound's shoulders. Brownie rose and followed the boy, heads bent as they climbed back up the steep lane.

Brigid waved one last time and sank into the soft squabs. She swiped

at her wet cheeks as the outline of her family became fainter and fainter.

Saints and sinners, get hold of yerself.

If Brownie and Liam could be brave, she had to follow suit. She reached into the pocket of her cloak, and her fingers wrapped around the worry stone. Her grandmother's words were still fresh in her mind as her thumb moved in a circle over the smooth surface.

Think of this as an adventure. Observe, learn, and grow from it.

If there was one thing the MacNaughtons were known for, it was their love of a good adventure. Or brawl, if her brothers were involved. She thought of Kirsty, who pored over old fashion magazines and would love to be in Brigid's place. Natural optimism took hold, a grin curving her lips.

"Weel, London, here I come. I hope ye're ready for me."

Chapter Two

The Trouble with the Truth

February 1820
Castle Raygin

Frank pushed open the door of the orangery and breathed in the scents of flowers, fruits, and vegetables. Citrus mixed with the earthy scent of kale and figs. The delicate floral perfume of oleander and lily of the valley floated past him as he strolled through the place that had been his mother's refuge. Growing things, she'd always said, gave her a sense of control she lacked in life. Her actions directly affected the outcome of each plant. No surprises, no retaliation, only growth and reward.

Shortly after her husband's death, Lady Raines had requested an addition be built onto the house. She'd always enjoyed working in the gardens, careful never to let the viscount find out. For her birthday as a widow, Frank had surprised her with sketches of an orangery. It had been completed within the year. She'd received almost seven years of joy from this room. At the end, he'd carried her here almost every day. Sometimes he read to her, other times she wanted to be alone with her thoughts and her "friends" as she called the plants.

A gardener met him halfway across the long structure, carrying a pink camellia in a small glass box. "Here ye go, my lord," Samuels said with a nod. "I didn't know if ye'd go today with the weather as it is."

"The snow is too deep to take the carriage to the cemetery," Frank acknowledged, accepting the flower. "As long as the horse can make it, I only have to stay in the saddle."

"You're a good son." The gardener bent his head as if embarrassed. "It's been almost a year, and ye haven't missed a week. I don't need a calendar, for ye come every Sunday like clockwork."

"You were close to my mother." He smiled at the gardener and looked around the space. So much color. Green, of course, but mixed with vibrant reds, oranges, pinks, and yellows.

"She spent much of her time here. Lady Raines was a special woman, didn't mind getting her hands dirty." Samuels stuck his fists in his

pockets and ducked his head again. "I was wondering since you'll be leaving for London, my lord, if ye'd want me to..."

"Continue my visits to the cemetery?" The request delivered an unexpected pang to Frank's heart. "I believe my mother would be honored. And I would be grateful."

Samuels gave a curt nod, red creeping up his neck. "Well then, my lord. I'd be happy to do it in your stead."

Returning to the main house, Frank shrugged into his greatcoat and pulled his hat snug on his head. When the weather was fair, he often walked. It was less than two miles along manicured lawn, through the garden wilderness, and over a stone bridge that spanned an excellent fishing stream. Castle Raygin occupied lush grounds of stunning views and plentiful hunting. He loved it here and, once married, would rarely leave. How ironic that a love of this estate was something he and the late viscount had shared.

Previous generations had been proud of its legacy, the many ancestors that had held the seat and the wealth it provided. Frank loved its beauty, its ability to be able to produce a livelihood for generations of both master and tenant. And his blessed woods, still his sanctuary when he needed to sort through a problem or calm his thoughts. There was a serenity there that soothed his soul.

His reflection in a passing window made him pause. The shy but determined thirteen-year-old had been replaced with Frank, Lord Raines. A man well-liked by his peers and respected by his tenants. A man who had come to know his place in the world—until a year ago. As an adult, he'd thrown himself into his new role of landlord. Like the viscountess, he wasn't afraid to get his hands dirty. His face was etched from hours in the sun and his blond hair more the color of soft lantern light than his mother's bright golden tresses. He appeared older than his years. Perhaps he was; he certainly felt it.

He reached the parish cemetery, dismounted, and shook the snow from his greatcoat. After he'd wiped off his hat and retrieved the camellia from his saddlebag, Frank approached the grave. He set the flower in front of the carved stone.

"Mama, I've come here every week for almost a year. With each visit, I hoped to find forgiveness in my heart. I have not. Your deception still haunts me, and I cannot move past it... yet."

The wind picked up. Fat flakes swirled in front of him, quickly covering the top of the glass box. His mind went back to that long ago night when he had tended his mother in her final moments.

"Let yourself go, Mama. There'll be no more pain," he'd said softly, holding her cold hand in his warm grip. His thumb ran back and forth over the paper-thin skin. He placed a hand on the counterpane in an effort to ease the rattle in her chest.

"I-I must..." She drew in a short breath and seized his hand, her faded eyes pleading. "I must tell you about your father..."

"Mama, we spoke of this many times. I've reconciled myself with—"

Her head lifted, and her nails dug into his skin. "His name is Sir Horace Franklin," she rasped and fell back against the bolster.

Frank's breath stopped. He'd heard wrong, or she was delirious.

"I fell in love with him, but my parents wanted me to marry one of the peerage."

He leaned closer to hear her every word, certain there was a mistake. His chest tightened as he forced air into his lungs.

"The viscount was very charming when I met him. Very convincing." She paused, eyes closed, and caught her breath. "I was an obedient daughter and agreed to the match made by my parents."

"You committed adultery?" Frank pulled his hand back, shocked. This had to be a bad dream. "Did my fath—did he know?"

That would explain the constant animosity toward his only son.

"Not until his final moments. The horror in his eyes, just before he died, was so satisfying." A tear rolled down the side of her face as she turned to cough into the pillow. Frank wiped her dry lips with a wet cloth. "You were conceived before the wedding *when*. I said goodbye to Horace. I loved him but was beguiled by London and the *ton*."

"So, when you found out you were with child, you kept your secret." His world was tipping; he felt off-balance. "And now you want to ease your conscience."

Who was this woman?

Who the bloody hell was he?

"By that time, I knew what kind of man my husband truly was. I was afraid. So afraid." The rattling began again, and she squeezed her eyes shut. "Forgive me."

Frank thought about his last trip to London taken several months after his mother's death. He and Charles Wilkens, his school chum from Eton, had met up with Wilkens' cousins at Hyde Park. It had been a beautiful day, and the Serpentine had frozen over. He'd liked the Franklin girls, Fenella and Evelina, immediately. The elder sister had the same light hair and gray eyes that Frank had thought he'd inherited from his grandfather. Now he wondered; did he look like his father? He

comprehended now that those two young women were his half-sisters. That would make Charles his cousin. At first, he'd rejoiced. He had family, siblings.

Frank had returned to London, determined to meet Sir Horace, and announce himself. The younger sister was still in London, and Miss Evelina had been welcoming when they'd met at a ball. He'd asked about her family. She pointed out her father, and Frank's heart had stopped when he saw an older version of himself. When Sir Horace weaved through the crowd to join his daughter, Frank lost his nerve. As he made his escape, he heard Miss Evelina mention his name and Sir Horace rant about the late viscount. Obviously, the two were not friends. If Sir Horace disliked the elder Lord Raines, Frank doubted he would welcome the son.

He'd decided to keep his secret and take comfort in the fact he had none of his stepfather's blood running through his own veins. Sir Horace was a successful merchant, quite wealthy from what he'd learned. The baron might think Frank was after his money. His jaw clenched at the idea.

Frank trailed a finger along the top of his mother's headstone. He loved his mother, but a year later, he was still reeling from her admission. Her last words had been a final request. She had endured a miserable life and did what she could to shield him from an angry, spiteful man. Regardless, he couldn't get past the years—after the viscount's death—when she could have told him.

"I want you to know, Mama, I haven't given up. Your final request was forgiveness, and I will continue to try." He squatted down, eye level with the stone and its etched flowers and vines. "For now, I must go. I'm lonely. I've decided I need a wife and a family of my own. Someone who will share this life with me, share my evenings, and my bed. A dozen children underfoot and laughter echoing in our halls."

He stood, a long breath escaping his lips. His plan was to go to London, look up Wilkens, and see what this Season had to offer. His requirements were a woman who was kind, competent in household management, and content with living in the country rather than Town. He had no desire to stay in the bustling city longer than he must. Nor did he have any desire to confront his father.

Franklin! So close to his own name, Francis. His mother's silent revenge against a cruel man who'd made her life miserable. He thought of his half-sisters and considered getting to know them better. Perhaps confide in Wilkens.

The trick would be avoiding Sir Horace Franklin.



February 1820

Home of Sir Horace Franklin

London, England

Brigid fell back onto the mattress and let out a dramatic sigh. “If I endure one more session of standing still, only to be poked and prodded, I will scream. It will echo all the way to the Highlands and summon the faeries to my rescue. Ye dinna want Scottish faeries making their mischief in London.”

Lady Brecken’s soft brown eyes twinkled with laughter. “I’d love to meet one, but without the mischief. Put your mind at ease, for all the fittings are done.”

“Promise?” she asked.

Aunt Maeve had returned to their country estate. Lissie was still in mourning and couldn’t attend any events, so her aunt had devised a new plan. She knew her niece would do best with a society friend closer to her age. To help Brigid through the Season, she’d arranged for her to stay with Evie, the former Miss Evelina Franklin. They were already family, in-laws of sorts, since Evie’s sister Fenella had married Brigid’s brother, Lachlan. The couple lived in Glasgow and worked at the family mill. With this in common, the two young women had become fast friends.

“I swear on my grandfather’s grave that your wardrobe is complete,” Evie said gravely, holding up her hand, palm out. “Next, we will continue the lesson on polite conversation.”

She groaned again. “I’ve been trying to think before I speak. Aunt Maeve said it would be the hardest task of all.”

“I’m so glad your aunt thought of this arrangement. Introducing you in London is just what I needed to keep my mind occupied.” Evelina had married in the autumn but found herself homesick. Her husband, Lord Brecken, had escorted her to Town for an extended visit while their home in Wales was under renovation. “I know Madoc only left yesterday, but I miss him so.”

Brigid snorted. “Ye’re homesick for yer papa, and once ye’re here, ye’re homesick for yer husband. I canna blame ye, though. Brecken is a verra handsome mon.”

“He is, isn’t he?” She tipped her head, observing her new friend. “What do you miss the most?”

Brigid studied her nails and blinked. “Besides my family, I miss my animals. Especially my pup, Brownie. My deerhound goes everywhere with me. It was like leaving my own child behind when I left.”

“I’ve never had a pet, though I had a favorite cat once. It lived in the kitchen when I was young. Now, let’s take a look at your hair.” Evie picked up an ivory comb, frowned at it, and exchanged it for a brush. “This will be less painful.”

“I warn ye, it’s a losing battle with my curls. They willna be tamed like yer lovely honey-brown waves.” She stuck her tongue out at her reflection. “My hair is as contrary as I am.”

“Please! My color palette is brown and brown compared to your auburn and vibrant blue. I’d give anything for the color of your eyes.” Evie pulled the brush through the chestnut tresses and sighed. “Will you let me add some ribbons? We’re at-home today and sure to have visitors.”

“Och, do yer worst.”



Two weeks later, late February

“Saints and sinners. Does anyone in London have a conversation worth repeating?” Brigid took a sip of tea and grimaced. She imagined Lady Franklin in an apoplectic fit as she drank a cup of ale instead. The woman was half-Scot but made her dislike of all things Scottish apparent. However, she treated Brigid well enough, and Sir Horace was a gem. He made her feel more than welcome in his house.

“Not in public,” answered Evelina in the cheeriest tone. “You remind me of my sister. She always wanted to talk about ledgers and crops and incoming shipments. Between her brain and her height, she scared any suitors away.”

Ye confront every mon who smiles at ye, speaking yer mind with no thought of the consequences. Brigid remembered her mother’s parting words. “Lachlan doesna seem to mind. Of course, a Scot has more common sense than most Englishmen.”

“Considering who you’ve met since your arrival, I’d have to concur. But there are some worthwhile English suitors. I believe my cousin Charles is quite smitten with you,” teased Evie.

“Och, I’m no’ but a source of entertainment to Mr. Wilkens. He canna wait to see what will come out of my mouth next.” Brigid snorted. “I thought he would explode at the musical yesterday trying to hold in his laughter. In my defense, I didn’t mean to make that comment out loud. It was supposed to stay in my head.”

The violinist had been horrendous. Every other stroke of bow against string had made her cringe. A *bilious seagull* had been her first thought. Which had come out in a loud whisper. Which had made Mr. Wilkens guffaw and heads turn. Which had sent Lady Franklin’s complexion into the color of a turnip. To Evie’s credit, she’d stood and applauded energetically, returning everyone’s attention to the deplorable violinist. It had been one of many such incidents.

“I heard yer mother tell Mrs. Wilkerson I might be more of an embarrassment than Fenella.” The outrageous lengths Evie’s sister engaged just to avoid marriage had only made Brigid appreciate her sister-in-law more. “At least I’m no’ *trying* to offend anyone.”

“Charles is picking us up this afternoon. It’s such a lovely day, I thought we’d take a ride in Hyde Park.” Evie wiggled her eyebrows, knowing that any outside activity would brighten Brigid’s day. “Along with a civil exchange, I think you should practice flirting with him. We’ll tell him advance, so he won’t be misled.”

She rolled her eyes. “If ye insist, though I dinna ken how flirtations will make me a reputable lady. I’d think it would be the other way around.”

“And tomorrow night, we’re invited to a dance. And you *will* dance,” Evelina said, ignoring the last comment, “without stepping on any toes. You’re very graceful, and I know you did it on purpose last week. Poor Lord Haverson hobbled around the rest of the night.”

“I swear the old lecher touched my backside when we started the dance. I promise to behave, though the sets are so long and tedious. I do enjoy the expressions that dash across Lady Franklin’s face when I forget myself.” She paused, worried she might be too bold with the next question. “How did yer father come to marry her? He’s so...”

“Nice? Considerate? Opposites attract, the scientists say.” Evelina brushed a crumb from her satin skirt. The deep blue complimented her ivory skin and cognac eyes. A cream lace overlay brought out the gold in her brown hair. “Papa was older when they met in Glasgow. He was handsome and wealthy and promised she would be called Lady Franklin if she married him.”

“Yer mother’s a Scot?” She crossed herself. Why did the woman have

such a fervent dislike of her own countrymen?

“Half. My grandfather was from Manchester.” Evie rolled her eyes. “Mama roars loudly but means well. Papa sees through the bluster, and so do I.”

They finished breakfast and went to Brigid’s room to choose a dress for the afternoon jaunt.

An hour later, she sat before the mirror as the maid pulled up her curls into a loose chignon. Curls fell against her cheek and the back of her neck.

“Perfect,” exclaimed Evie.

Brigid had to admit the girl looking back at her was quite pretty. The bottle-green muslin dress was a bold color and reminded her of the pines at home. A pale peach ribbon, cinched just below her bustline, added to the curve of her hips. A pelisse the same shade of the ribbon covered her bare arms.

“He’s here. Let’s meet him in the entrance hall.” Evie grabbed Brigid’s hand and pulled her from the room. “To summarize, talk of only dull subjects and practice the actions I taught you.”

The ride to Hyde Park was uneventful. While her bonnet did shade her eyes from the bright afternoon, Brigid hated the tightly tied ribbon under her chin. The sun shone on the Serpentine, the water sparkling as they made their way around the crowded Ring. Brigid didn’t care about the traffic. She sucked in the crisp air and longed to be cantering across a pasture, her plaid flying and Brownie running beside her. An elbow in her side snapped her from her reverie.

“Did you hear me?” asked a perturbed Evelina. “Remember flirtation is subtle. A glance from beneath your lashes, a certain flutter of your fan, a side look.”

“I canna just wink at the mon I want to kiss?” she asked innocently. “And there’s nothing subtle about a lady using a fan outside in February.”

Mr. Wilkens’ shoulders jiggled beside her. His short-cropped brown hair was hidden beneath his hat, but she saw the sparkle of humor in his brown eyes. “I do believe I’m falling madly in love with you, Miss MacNaughton. You may wink at me any time the urge comes upon you.”

Evie rolled her eyes. “You’re no help, Cousin.”

“It’s not in my best interest,” he quipped. “Why change something already so perfect?”

Brigid flushed. “Are ye serious or flirting?”

“Both,” he admitted with a grin. “I consider you the most refreshing

débutante of the Season.”

“And ye’re the most skillful liar I’ve met since I arrived.” She gave him an exaggerated wink. “How’s that for seduction?”

“You can’t say words like that in mixed company!” Evelina gasped.

“Isn’t that what we’re practicing?”

“In a sense, but... you’ll be considered a hussy.”

The English were full of contradictions. Brigid understood what Evie wanted to teach her. She’d watched the other girls at the various dinners, dances, and events. As a child, she had been able to mimic others easily. This would be no different if she had to prove herself. But why put forth the effort only to lure some poor oaf into a dance? Worse, what if one of them wanted to court her? Brigid wasn’t mean-spirited. On the one hand, she didn’t want to add trifling with a hopeful dandy to her list of learned accomplishments. On the other, there had not been one man so far that had inspired her to attempt it.

“Perhaps I’ll just become the mute Scot. That would solve our problems.” She crossed her arms and scowled at an approaching rider.

Her friends laughed. And laughed. Evie dabbed at her eyes with a gloved finger. “Oh my, that was funny. You, quiet?” She hiccupped. “Now look what you’ve done.” Another fit of giggles.

A gentleman reined in his horse next to them, and Mr. Wilkens pulled the carriage to a stop. “Frank, it’s good to see you again,” he called and put out his hand. The stranger bent and gripped Mr. Wilkens’ hand, then took off his hat and tipped it at the ladies.

“This is Lord Raines, one of my oldest friends from Eton,” he told the girls. “You remember my cousin, Lady Brecken? This is Miss MacNaughton, visiting us from Scotland.”

“It’s a pleasure,” he said in a deep timbre that warmed her like a crackling fire on a winter’s night. “My congratulations on your marriage.”

Brigid turned to look at the newcomer. He was tall and lean, but not thin. A square jaw set above broad shoulders. His blond hair gleamed, and his clear gray eyes locked with hers. Heat spread over her face as he smiled and nodded at her. She couldn’t swallow, couldn’t break his gaze, couldn’t speak.

She was lost in those orbs of molten steel.

Chapter Three

Shams and Charlatans

Frank had only arrived in Town the previous day. He'd planned on a ride through Hyde Park and dinner at Boodle's. "I was hoping to run into you tonight at the club. Will you be there?" he asked, unable to take his eyes off the prime article between his two friends.

She had luxurious, auburn hair and the most brilliant blue eyes he'd ever seen. Heat surged through him. He resisted the urge to groan when the tip of her tongue peeked out and swiped her full lower lip.

Say something, you chawbacon! ordered a voice in his head.

"Miss MacNaughton, have you visited London before?" At least his voice held steady.

"No," she murmured and cast her eyes to her lap.

Demure and lovely. Frank smiled encouragingly to give her confidence. "Are you enjoying the city so far?"

Miss MacNaughton nodded and gave him a sideways glance. "Especially the ride today," she murmured.

The sun flashed one of her curls a deep red. Captivating. That's what she was. "Where in Scotland are you from? I have an estate in the North."

Why were Wilkens and Lady Brecken giving one another such odd looks? Perhaps they were surprised this shy creature had opened up so quickly. He understood the quiet ones, for he himself was more reserved than outgoing.

"The Highlands, my lord, near Dunderave."

He could hear her brogue now. Charming.

"In answer to your question," interrupted Wilkens, a curious expression on his face, "I had planned on Boodle's tonight. Shall we meet in the dining room?"

Frank nodded.

"What time?"

"That would be fine." Frank studied her profile, the straight nose and perfect chin set in the oval face. Her skin had a dusting of light freckles over her nose.

"I'll bring the monkeys, and you secure the elephants. We'll have a wager in the books on which beast storms the gaming tables first."

"Yes, of course. I fully agree." He wanted to place a kiss on the tip of that nose, then close each ocean-blue eye with his mouth, move to her chin and her smiling lips...

Wait! What? Elephants and monkeys?

"Lord Raines, what brings you back to London? I don't believe we've come across each other since last summer."

Lady Brecken's voice cut through the fog in his brain. His gaze snapped to her, and he realized belatedly that they were all smiling at him. Heat spread across his face. He cleared his throat and focused. "I've been busy with my estate, putting things in order after my mother passed."

"I was so sorry to hear it," said Lady Brecken. "I remember how devoted you were to her."

Frank nodded, relieved the spell had been broken. It had certainly felt like an enchantment. "Thank you. She was ill for so long. I think it was almost a blessing when she was out of her pain." He placed his beaver hat back on his head and adjusted his gloves, giving his eyes somewhere to look besides Miss MacNaughton. He couldn't admit he was in London to find a wife, so he'd just dodge the question.

"Well, tonight around eight, then?" asked Wilkens with a smirk as his eyes traveled from Raines to Miss MacNaughton. "Seems we'll have much to talk about."



Later that evening

Boodle's Gentlemen's Club

"How the devil are you, Frank?" asked Charles, pumping his hand. The awkwardness was gone without the women present. "I expected to see you when the weather was nicer. Or are you thinking to claim a seat in the House?"

"Never, Wilkens! I prefer to stay removed from politics, if you don't mind." He took a chair and held his glass up to a footman. "I'm parched."

Wilkens also enjoyed a glass of claret as they waited for their meal and shared the latest news, telling of Evie's wedding and that of her sister. Guilt niggled at him as his friend—cousin—spoke of Frank's half-

sisters. He wondered if he should tell Charles about Sir Horace. Would it push the limits of their friendship to keep such a secret? And how would Wilkens feel about being related to him?

“So, what brings you to London?”

Frank hesitated, then plunged on with the safer subject. “I find myself in need of a wife.”

Wilkens sprayed a mouthful of claret over the table, red seeping into the white cloth. “I beg your pardon,” he spluttered. “When did you come to this conclusion?”

“Christmastide,” he admitted. “I’m lonely.” Did he sound pathetic? To the devil, he didn’t care.

“Buy a new horse, get a hound to lay at your feet in the evenings.” Wilkens wiped his sleeve and the tablecloth with his napkin. “That explains your trance this afternoon, then.”

He flushed. “Miss MacNaughton took me by surprise.”

“I gathered that.” Charles leaned back in his chair. “So, you’re interested?”

“I forgot what a genius you are, Wilkens.” He threw back the rest of his claret, not liking where this conversation was headed. Then again, he *was* interested. “She’s a beauty.”

“A rough diamond of the first water. Here to learn some English etiquette from what I understand.”

“Has she favored anyone?”

Wilkens studied him for a moment, then shook his head. “Not until today.”

He let out a long breath. Had he been holding it? *Bloody hell!* “What does that mean?”

“You’re the first English gentleman she has shown any interest in at all,” Charles said, his eyebrows raised. “However, I’m not sure she’s a suitable match.”

“Why?” His chest tightened, coming to her defense. “I thought she was delightful.”

“Indeed. I’d even add witty, alluring, and clever. Then there’s stub —”

“You’re also interested in her, aren’t you?” Why else would Wilkens talk him out of courting someone as lovely as Miss MacNaughton?

“I admit I’m attracted to her, but what virile man with eyes wouldn’t be? You can’t choose the first woman you meet in London.” He rubbed his jaw, his gaze thoughtful. “She comes from a different world. The Highlands have unique customs, an older way of life, *and* she has no

title.”

If he only knew, thought Frank, *that I shouldn't have one*. “It doesn't matter to me. I'm close enough to the border to understand the Scots,” Frank argued.

“Lowlanders aren't the same as their countrymen in the Highlands. The two groups have been feuding and raiding each other's lands for centuries.”

“You want her for yourself,” Frank broached again. He didn't want to compete with his friend, but he was drawn to this girl. There was something about her that spoke to him.

“Rest easy.” Wilkens held up both hands. “I'll not stand in your way, but be warned. Miss MacNaughton is forthright and inexperienced with English customs and propriety. She's not the type of poised woman you're accustomed to.”

Frank grunted. It had been a long while since he'd entertained anyone of the female persuasion. The opportunities to dally with a woman, the type who only wanted some distraction, dwindled in the country. And when it came to carnal pleasures... it wasn't as if he could take up with a maid or a village girl. He had to make do with his rare trips into London.

Could that be the reason for his instant ardor? It would make sense. But more than the physical attraction, there had been an inexplicable sense of wholeness inside him when their eyes met. She was his destiny; he was certain of it.

“I don't want a typical woman. She must be content on my estate most of the year and not miss the glitter of London. A wife who *wants* children rather than gives birth out of duty. I was raised by one parent who loved me, and one who tolerated me out of duty.” He swiped a hand over his face. “In short, I want what my mother never had. A love match.”

And when had he decided that? *This afternoon*, he thought, conjuring up the image of an auburn beauty with sapphire eyes.

A footman appeared with a cart and two silver trays. They ate overcooked beef-steaks and boiled fowl with oyster sauce. The clubs weren't known for their chefs, but this wasn't bad. Still, Frank missed the cook at Castle Raygin.

“Shall we try our luck tonight?” he asked, not ready to go back his rooms at the Mivart and brood by himself. He was enjoying this time with Wilkens. “A few games of whist? Vingt-et-un or hazard?”

“Consider me your accomplice for the evening.”

After success at whist and a bottle of brandy, they tempted fate at the hazard table and lost. This called for a second bottle of brandy.

"I'm done for the night," said Charles, throwing back the last of his drink. "I quit before I lose all my brass *and* my wits."

"A wwwise man once tol' me..." Frank drew his brows in concentration. His head was fuzzy, or was it his eyes? He rubbed them with his palms, then grinned. *Much better!* "Tol' me ta follow the gentleman who was the leas' drunk. Sssso I'm right behind ya." He frowned as he swayed a tiny bit.

"Who was that? *We* know a wise man?" Wilkens slapped his thigh and doubled over with a hearty snigger.

"You, you bumble-headed rattle." Frank laughed, then belched. "Beg your pardon."

"What d'you know? I'm a wise man. D'you think I carried the gold, the fran-frankcense, or the more?"

"Mmmmyrrh."

"Myrrh. Right you are." Wilkens paused. "You should be the wise man, except"—he hiccupped—"you want to get legshackled." He grabbed his stomach, falling over into another fit of chortles.

"Thaz right." Frank stood with his feet planted. "Thank you. I nnnneeded time with my old friend tonight. Are ya sstayin' the entire Ssseason?"

"I'm not leavin' til you choose the next. Laaaady. Raines." He poked Frank's chest with each word. "And I want to be wi'ness at the wwwedding."

A footman sent for a hackney. "I'll send a stableboy with your horses in the morning. You cannot ride in such a state, my lords," he said in a jovial tone as he assisted them both into the vehicle.

"Corner of Brooks and Davies," a voice called outside the cab.

Frank heard the address given, knew he was heading in the right direction, and slouched into the leather squab. The driver escorted him inside the hotel. "Are ye capable from here, my lord?"

Frank sent the driver on his way with a grunt and some coin, then squinted at the very long flight of stairs. He only stumbled once, he was sure, and was careful not to wake his valet. Old Barker had tended Frank's stepfather and stayed on. The valet had always been kind to him as a child, and Frank had been glad for Barker's company the past few years.

As he pulled at his cravat, the gray-haired, slightly balding man opened the connecting door. "Good evening, my lord. Let me assist

you.”

“Mmmy apol-gies, Barker. I didn’t want to wwake you,” he slurred, then slumped into a chair. “I indulged a bi’ mmmuch.”

“Yes, my lord,” the elder man said. His fingers deftly unwound the cravat and unbuttoned his waistcoat.

“I need a wwwife, Barker. A sweeeet wife in my bed. Every. Night.”

“Yes, my lord.” Barker put an arm around his shoulder and pulled him up. “Let’s get you to bed.”



The next morning

The Mivart Hotel

His head must be the size of a chamber pot. He swallowed, choking on the fur coating his tongue. A moan. His voice? He sat up and opened his eyes, only to slam them shut against the bright morning sun.

“Good morning, my lord.”

Barker. “Is it still morning?” he rasped.

“Yes, sir. Dinner has not yet been served.”

He opened one eye. Barker stood beside the bed with a tray. He removed a wet cloth and handed it to Frank, who obediently placed it on his forehead. With his free hand, he accepted the headache powder and popped it in his mouth. He handed it back and took the offered tea to wash down the horrible taste that coated his tongue. He collapsed against the bolster again.

“How did you know I would need this?” he asked weakly.

“I’m your valet, sir. I put you to bed last night.” He left with the tray and returned a few minutes later with a towel over his shoulder and a fresh bowl of water. “Feeling better, my lord?”

Frank nodded, surprised. “Yes, thank you for the tea.”

Barker gave him a small smile. “You’re welcome. Would you like a shave?”

“Very much.” It didn’t hurt to keep his eyes open now. His stomach growled. “You wouldn’t have thought to order some breakfast?”

“Of course, sir. I arranged for it as soon as I was prepared for the day.” He waved a hand at a side table. Several plates held cold sliced beef, cheese, and thick slices of bread. “Eat and then shave, sir?”

“I don’t think I pay you enough,” Frank said around a mouthful of cheese. “And I want you to know this is not my habit every time I come

to London. I haven't been that foxed since university."

"I've never seen you in such condition at Castle Raygin, my lord." Another small smile. "May I offer my sincerest hope that you achieve your goal while here in London?"

"My goal?"

"I believe your exact words were, 'I need a wife, Barker. A sweet wife in my bed. Every. Night.' You were adamant on the subject."

Should he reprimand the man for impudence or nod in agreement? Neither, as he let out a loud shout of laughter.



*Same morning
Across Town*

Brigid pulled on the long cambric shirt, wool breeches, and boots. She twisted her hair, pinned it on top of her head, and pulled on a cap. A baggy coat with the collar pulled up completed her ensemble. The maid had already been in to start the fire, and she'd told her she wasn't feeling well and would stay in bed later today.

As she crept down the servant stairs, head down, she thought of Lady Franklin. If her hostess were to find out, Brigid might be sent back to Aunt Maeve. She grinned. This was worth it.

She made her way outside and to the stable. The young grooms had saddled two horses and were peering around the corner. "Are ye nervous, lads? I'll let ye out of the bargain." She'd heard the stablehands arguing over who would ride which horse during the morning exercise. When Brigid found out they rode to Hyde Park and galloped on Rotten Row, she wanted in. Every few days, she met two of them behind the stables and pretended to be one of the lads. In exchange, she saved whatever sweets or baked goods she could carry in her pocket.

Evie had remarked that perhaps Brigid had grown overly fond of the English treats. Brigid had nodded, smiled, and been more furtive when taking the biscuits or sweetmeats. Now she handed over the biscuits and jam wrapped in a napkin. "Remember to leave the cloth somewhere in the kitchen where they'll find it. After ye've gone," she reminded them.

One of the horses was a stout, midnight black gelding. It had the same glossy coat as her own horse but with a white blaze peeking out from a long forelock. "I want this one, if ye dinna mind." She bit her lip, hoping the pain would take her mind off home. She longed for a chat

with her mother by the fireplace or big, smothering hug from her grandda. Did Brodie and Kirsty think of her?

“No, miss,” one said as he pulled a bite from the muffin and popped it in his mouth.

The other lad bent over, hands on his bent knees, acting as a mounting block for Brigid. She smiled. “I appreciate the offer, but I can manage.”

“Watch this,” said the first boy, pointing at Brigid.

She walked the horse outside, grabbed the reins and thick black mane, and vaulted into the saddle. The stirrups were a good height, so she slipped her boots in and called to the lads. “Whoever is coming with me, best hurry. I must be back before breakfast.”

“Aye, miss,” called the first stable hand, awe in his green eyes. He tried to do the same as Brigid but slid down the side of the horse. With a red face, he flipped over an empty bucket and used it to hop on.

The Franklins lived in Mayfair, and it was an easy ride to Hyde Park. While her escort munched on his muffin, Brigid’s mind drifted back to the day she’d met Lord Raines from the North. He had taken her breath away. His light blond hair brightened in the sun like a Viking. Those honest, gray eyes reminded her of the melted steel at the blacksmith’s shop. The easy smile with straight white teeth, wide shoulders, and commanding seat in the saddle had sent butterflies swarming in her stomach. While his coloring was fair, his skin had seen years in the sun. The laugh lines around his eyes added to his good looks, making him mature and worldly.

Brigid put a hand on her belly to still the tumbling. He was cultured, polished, and everything she didn’t think she liked in the other men she’d met. Yet, the intense gaze they’d shared at that first meeting... Her heart thrummed at the memory. They had briefly spoken again at a soiree. He’d bent and kissed her gloved hand before a countess had demanded his attention. That same night, she’d dreamt of her first kiss.

Would she see him again? Did she dare ask Mr. Wilkens about him? Or Evie? No, Lady Brecken would only play matchmaker. With a grin, she remembered their shocked looks on the drive back to Mayfair that day.

“You’ve been taking in everything I’ve said and only pretended not to care!” exclaimed Evelina. “You’ve been cutting a sham. I can’t believe I fell for it.”

“If you were a man, we’d make a fortune gaming. Such an impassive face, yet quite convincing,” added Mr. Wilkens. “I almost believed you

were a shy innocent myself.”

“I suppose I needed the right motivation,” Brigid defended herself, not that she cared. She’d just discovered the reason to be the perfect London miss. And not even an English-born lady would surpass her sudden interest in etiquette and mundane conversation.

What was on their schedule for the rest of the week? She went through a mental list of the invitations received. Yes! The theater tomorrow night. Would he be there?

Her horse nickered, and she recognized the bridle path of Hyde Park. There were other grooms out, exercising their masters’ horses. During her first early morning adventure, no one paid attention to Brigid. The second time, she’d received several curious looks. Today, they whispered and looked away when caught staring.

When she pulled in her mount after a long canter, Brigid put a hand on the groom’s rein as he went to turn his horse. “They ken who I am?”

The stable hand gave her a lopsided grin. “Joey was bragging about you bein’ a woman. He didn’t mean no harm. We think you’re bang up to the mark, miss. No one knows your name, and I told ‘em you were a servant of one of the guests.”

“Thank ye. Let’s keep it that way, shall we?” Brigid decided to stay silent. Her brogue would surely give her away. “One more gallop before we head back, eh?” How she loved this long strip that allowed for speed. The wind against her face, the muscles of her mount beneath her, the sound of pounding hoofs against the soft earth—it was heaven. The Lady’s Mile bridle path provided a safe place for those who preferred a sedate ride. Och, what would be the point of that?

An hour later, she slipped up the back stairs, head down, and ran into something. *Saints and sinners!* She peered up to find Evie’s maid, Louella, grinning at her.

“Your secret’s safe with me,” the girl said cheerfully, light brown wisps escaping her mobcap. “Be in the dining room within fifteen minutes, and no one will be the wiser.”

Brigid mouthed a “thank you” and hurried to her room. Her mind had already moved on to which dress she would wear the next evening, how she should arrange her hair, and what accessories would be appropriate. Something blue to bring out her eyes. Any jewel-tones complimented her hair, according to Evie. As she reached the top step, her hand froze on the door. What just happened?

Ye’ll surprise yerself at what ye’re capable of for the right mon, her mother had said.

But Brigid MacNaughton having a serious one-sided conversation with herself about fashion? May pigs fly and her grandda admit he was wrong, for the world had tipped upside down.

Chapter Four

Besotted by the Second Act

March 1820

Theatre Royale, Drury Lane

“We leave in ten minutes,” announced Lady Brecken from the hall.

“I’ll be down before then, Evie.” Brigid sat down at her dressing table and unfolded the letter from Kirsty. She’d received and responded to two letters from Ma and one from her grandmother. This was the first from her sister-in-law, which was odd. She’d have thought Kirsty would have besieged her with correspondence.

Dear Brigid,

This damp castle is no’ the same without ye. I miss ye terribly, though my mother says it’s just my condition. It seems a bairn in yer belly makes ye weepy. Yes, ye read it correctly. I’m with child, and yer brother canna wipe the smile from his face. So now ye understand why I havena written. The nausea is easing, so I’ll do my best to make up for my inattention.

The MacNaughton has announced that if it’s a boy, he should be called Calum after the chief. I told him we’d consider it, but we all ken how persuasive he can be. Besides, yer grandfather is one of my favorite people, so I imagine there will be another Calum—or Calla, what do ye think?—toddling around here by next year.

I hope ye are adjusting well. Ye’re on my mind when my head isna in the chamber pot. Brownie moped for almost a week, then gave in to Liam’s affection. The hound is stuck to him like a bur in a horse’s tail. The lad has also been exercising yer pony and practicing with the bow. He’s calling himself Robin Hood and has taken to stealing baked goods from the kitchen to give to the poor... dogs. Enid yer cook says he’ll need all the Merry Men to rescue him if he lifts one more of her tarts.

Everyone sends their best. We’re sure all of London has fallen under yer charms. Sending ye hugs and kisses from yer family, human

and furry.

All my love,

Kirsty

Brigid blinked as she folded the paper and tucked it back in the envelope. Not one tear had blurred her vision since she'd arrived, but a few words from home had her holding back a flood. She put on a bright smile, refusing to let the swirl of emotions inside take hold.

"I'm to be an auntie," she informed Evie and Mr. Wilkens as she joined them in the hall. "Kirsty and Brodie will give us the first of a new generation."

"Congratulations!" said Mr. Wilkens with a big smile.

"A baby! Oh, how I love babies," gushed Evie, "though childbirth frightens me. You said she and her mother are healers, didn't you? How helpful to have a knowledgeable mother by one's side during such a time."

"Enough about the trials of women. Shall we go?" asked Mr. Wilken, who had turned slightly pink at the mention of childbirth.

"Ye're no' squeamish are ye?" Brigid asked, feeling impish at the good news. "Have ye never helped one of yer horses or a dog give birth?"

"Egad, no! I leave that sort of thing to those more experienced." He grinned. "I fulfill a much-needed role for my friends who cross the threshold to fatherhood."

"What's that?" asked Evie.

"I share a congratulatory bottle of fine French brandy." With that, he ushered the ladies out the door and into the coach.

Brigid took a deep breath to slow her racing pulse. It was her first London performance, *and* Lord Raines would be at the theater tonight. She wore a mazarine blue dress of silk with the sheerest silver gauze overlay. Her hair was swept up, with one long, twirling lock on the left. It fell almost to her collarbone and tickled her shoulder whenever she moved. Silver beads glittered in her hair, bringing out the streaks of deep ruby. A pewter pendant of the MacNaughton clan badge nestled just above her cleavage. She absently rubbed the round tower set in the silver circle, her thumb running along the engraved motto "I hope in God." It had been her mother's, given to her daughter as a going-away gift.

"Are you nervous?" asked Evie.

She nodded, watching the traffic through the open slats of the

carriage window. Her fingers absently rubbed her grandmother's stone. Brigid kept it in a pocket or her reticule at all times, reaching for it whenever she thought of her family or felt tense. She never took it out of the velvet pouch, afraid to drop and crack or break it.

"About the theater or seeing Lord Raines?" A hint of mischief shone in Evie's light brown eyes.

"Both," Brigid admitted with a laugh.

"So which Miss MacNaughton will be attending tonight's performance? The shy and demure young lady or the independent, outspoken one?" Charles chuckled. "Have you ever thought of acting? I think you'd be quite successful."

They turned onto Brydges Street, and the coach stopped in front of a large building with four rectangular pillars gracing the entrance. Windows lined the upper floor, and footmen waited to open carriage doors for the arrivals. Drury Lane wasn't nearly as grand as she'd expected. A spacious hall led to the boxes and pit. From here, they entered an elegant rotunda. On the opposite side of this room was the grand saloon, and she tilted her head back to admire the intricate arched ceiling. On each end, two gigantic Corinthian columns of verd antique flanked a border of ten corresponding pillars on each side.

"Miss MacNaughton, may I say you are stunning tonight?" asked a deep voice.

The viscount's breath tickled her ear and sent her pulse racing. As *many times as you'd like*, she thought, cursing her belly for the flips and somersaults inside. Her lips curved into a brilliant smile, despite her best effort to appear nonchalant. No man had ever affected her like this. It was unbalancing.

"Ye're too kind, sir," she murmured. Relief swept over her as these memorized responses were snatched from her brain and funneled to her mouth. Her eyes remained on the floor and the tips of his dress shoes. She could feel the heat of him through her thin muslin. Perhaps *this* was swooning.

"Glad you could make it, Raines. It's time to find our box," announced Charles. He held out an arm to Brigid. She accepted, careful to hide her disappointment. Or so she thought.

"Don't worry, I'll sit by my cousin once we enter. My demure little kitten," he teased.

"Thank ye, Mr. Wilken. Am I so transparent?"

"Only to the trained eye."

Brigid gaped at the theater's interior. Gold on green shimmered in

the light from dozens of chandeliers. The stage dominated the center of the room, with three stories of boxes arcing around it. *Magnificent*. The décor was as breathtaking as the Highlands at dawn, in its own way. But God created the latter, and man could destroy the former.

“Oh, Brigid, you don’t mind if I sit in the front, do you?” asked Evie sweetly. “You’re taller than I am, and I won’t be able to see.”

“Of course not.” She and Charles stepped to the side as Lord Raines helped Evie to her seat.

“Thank you, my lord. Would you mind if my cousin sat next to me? We were in the middle of a conversation just before you arrived.” Evie smiled sweetly at Lord Raines.

“I would be happy to,” he acquiesced. When he turned, his gaze met Brigid’s.

Her hand flew to her stomach, squelching the wings. She clutched the reticule in her lap, her fingers wrapped around the stone inside. *Och, those eyes*. Clear gray that seemed to see right through her. She felt bare, shivered, and pulled her pelisse more tightly around her.

“Miss MacNaughton?” Lord Raines held out his hand, indicating a seat behind Evie. He held the frame and pushed it slightly forward as she sat.

It was a habit she still was not accustomed to, but she accepted his help. He settled next to her, and the scent of leather and something citrus floated past her. He smelled better than one of Grandda’s pipes. She stifled a giggle.

“May I share a secret with you, Miss MacNaughton?” He had leaned toward her, his shoulder brushing hers.

A tingle ran down her arm. She closed her eyes. No, *this* was swooning. “I’m known to be able to keep one.”

“I don’t even know what we’re about to watch. I heard you would be attending, so I invited myself.” His mouth curved up, his tone hopeful. “Does my forwardness shock you?”

She giggled and shook her head. “I’m still learning my way here, so I barely ken what should shock me.” *Should I thank him? Tell him I feel the same and that he’s the most handsome man I’ve ever seen?* Instead, she bit the inside of her cheek to keep more words from gushing out.

“That’s a relief. I’m a bit rusty myself with Town ways. My estate has taken up much of my time.” He settled back in the chair. “What kind of entertainment do you enjoy? Is your life vastly different from London? I’m used to a much more sedate pace these days.”

She laughed, hoping it was the light tinkle she’d practiced with Evie.

"It's a wee different. We have grand ceilidhs on holidays and anytime we can find an excuse."

"That's a dance, like a ball?"

"No' exactly. Most ceilidhs include dancing, feasting, and everyone is invited. We dinna stand on ceremony in the Highlands when it comes to get-togethers." Brigid covered her mouth, her eyes wide. She hoped that wasn't offensive.

"I remember being punished for playing with the village children." He grinned. "I was careful my fath—that he—didn't find out after that. In fact, I used to sneak off to the blacksmith's each week to take boxing lessons. He would have died a younger man from the shock to his heart. Or I would have been sent away to school much younger."

"Ye dinna agree with the importance of titles?" She knew he wasn't like the other dandies she'd met. "I thought all English held theirs in high esteem."

He shook his head. "Not me. Are you concerned with the social circles?"

"Och, no. Circles make me dizzy."

Lord Raines laughed. "Beautiful and a great wit. I like you, Miss MacNaughton."

Brigid smiled, heat flushing her face. "Thank ye. I rather like ye too, my lord."

If anyone were to ask her about her first experience at the theater, she would be able to describe in detail the deep green of Lord Raines' waistcoat, his wide shoulders that stretched the snug jacket to its limit, his thick blond hair combed back and curling slightly around his collar. Brigid would not recall one detail from the performance. It wasn't her fault. She was positive it couldn't have been more interesting than the conversation with the viscount.

"I dinna understand the need to send children away for schooling." Brigid couldn't imagine a child not being with parents, let alone being raised by a stranger. "Did ye no' have a tutor?"

"A wonderful, insightful man. He loved to debate and would often make me take the unpopular viewpoint just to test my skill." Brigid heard the affection in his voice. "I'm told I can be quite persuasive when I'm prepared."

"Ye need to prepare to prove a point? My family just commences, then yells over one another to be heard." She thought of her grandda and Brodie when they had a *difference of opinion* as they called it. Nothing planned or polite in *their* conversation.

"Ah, you confuse debate with argument. In a debate, each side presents his case with logic and precedents. The side with the most proof is the victor." He crossed his arms. "Emotion doesn't enter into it."

"A debate would never work in my family, then. Passion is the foundation of every disagreement, large or small." She gave him a side glance. He was smiling at her, a glint in his eyes that reminded her of Brodie when he looked at Kirsty. Her heart hammered in her ear, and she snapped open her fan to cool her skin. "Did yer father appreciate yer skill?"

His face darkened at the question, and she regretted asking.

"No."

He offered no other explanation, so Brigid changed the subject. She had the impression he hadn't gotten along with his father. Typical parent-son conflict or something deeper? "Do ye plan to stay in London long? I've learned many noblemen keep a home here." That seemed safe enough.

"I'm renting for now. After the Season, I'll return to Castle Raygin and anticipate only brief visits after that." He tilted his head and studied her. "If I'm successful."

"At?" His gaze was so intense, she squirmed a bit in her chair and fluttered the fan again.

"I've decided it's time to marry." He folded his arms across his broad chest. "Is that too honest?"

Brigid shook her head, unable to drag her eyes from his. "I appreciate honesty. But why come all the way to London? Is there no one near yer home?" Or did he have some unknown trait that scared away his prospects like she had? Perhaps they were two peas in a pod, but she couldn't imagine women running away from him.

"No one with the proper upbringing."

"I thought ye dinna care about titles?" Ah, perhaps he'd only said that for her sake.

"I don't, but I have a responsibility to my tenants and those who work under me. My wife will need to understand my duties and know how to run the household." He smiled. "A girl from the village would be overwhelmed."

"A rich merchant's daughter with an education wouldna be sufficient?" An image of holding a baby with pale red-blond hair flashed before her once again. *Saints and sinners. Is he my destiny?* she wondered. "Or is there a list of qualifications?"

Lord Raines chuckled, and it washed over her like a soft summer

breeze. “I need a wife who can oversee the servants with kindness, who will be gracious and generous, and who *wants* a family rather than seeing children as a duty.”

“That doesna seem so out of the ordinary.”

The viscount let out a hearty laugh. Heads turned and a round of *shhh*’s reprimanded him for his outburst. “You really haven’t been here long, have you?”

She pressed her lips together to hold back her own laugh.

“Do you have those qualities, Miss MacNaughton?”



Frank was mesmerized by her eyes. It reminded him of the blue roofs and sparkling waters of the Greek Isles. Or was it her hair? A light brown coated with a rich red, and it smelled of heather. He watched as she moved her head, the colors changing from honey to chestnut to flame. And back to honey. Or that mouth. Full pink lips, the plump bottom lip wet now from her tongue sliding across it. Heat pooled low in his belly.

He couldn’t remember the last time he’d been so comfortable with a woman. The words just seemed to flow out of his mouth. She spoke more tonight, so perhaps she felt at ease with him too. Frank grinned while she considered his question. And it hit him. The constant heaviness, the weight that had pressed on his shoulders since he’d learned his mother’s secret, had eased. He wanted to reach out, stroke her face with his thumb, and thank her. For there was no doubt that she was the reason. He knew it with a certainty that almost frightened him.

“I can give orders well enough,” Miss MacNaughton began, “and I grew up surrounded by an enormous family. A clan, ye ken.” She grimaced and shrugged her shoulders. “But gracious is what I consider my mother, and generous—”

“Do you have many siblings? I was the only surviving child *and* the only boy.” He remembered the chaos and laughter whenever he visited Wilkens’ house. Frank wanted a house like that, a family waiting for him, eager to see him and share their latest adventure. He would ask his wife how her day went, and she would regale him with her woes from the staff and the hectic day the nanny and tutor had endured.

When he looked up, Miss MacNaughton was staring at him, a shine in her eye that hinted she’d heard the sadness in the question. She reached out and gripped his forearm, her warmth seeping through his

sleeve, up his arm, and into his heart.

“Ye must have been lonely, especially when yer father didna want ye playing with the village children.” She squeezed him and gave him a brilliant smile. “There’s nothing better than being surrounded by people who love ye. Dinna settle for less than that, Lord Raines. Ye’ll regret it.”

Applause drowned out the last of her words, but he knew what she was telling him. They stood and clapped with the rest of the audience. He realized he hadn’t heard a word of the performance. He’d only had ears for Miss MacNaughton.

Chapter Five

Climbing Monkeys, Soaring Passions

A week later
Hyde Park, London

Frank had been told by a little bird that he should take a ride along Rotten Row that afternoon. Since the theater, his mind had been consumed with the beautiful Miss MacNaughton. He realized the heaviness lifted whenever she was present. Something about her made him feel...

Bloody hell, he wished he knew. His dreams had taken a sensual turn. His body responded at just the sight of her. His heart thudded when she turned those knowing, blue eyes on him. He wanted her. He needed her. And he'd known her but a few short weeks.

Yet, he'd been waiting for her for a lifetime.

More and more of the *ton* flooded into London each week. His name would soon be on the tongues of hopeful mamas. They would cut into his time with Miss MacNaughton. Aside from working on his estate and enjoying the country life, there was nothing he enjoyed more than listening to her speak of Scotland and her clan.

At the musicale several nights ago, he'd finally learned of her three brothers. He wanted to wrap his arms around her when she'd told of her older brother's death. Ian, the second eldest, had been at the political gathering in Manchester last summer. Peaceful workers and their families had gathered to hear the famous Henry Hunt speak on equality and workers' rights. The cavalry and volunteers were called, pushed into the throng, and a massacre ensued. It had been dubbed the Peterloo Massacre.

Miss MacNaughton's brother had been trampled and left behind a young widow.

She described her brother Brodie as her best friend and the younger version of her grandfather. He would be the next clan chief, after her grandfather stepped down or died. Frank asked if the MacNaughton maintained his health in his advanced years. She had laughed, wiped

her eyes, then laughed some more.

“Grandda fills a room when he enters it. He’s a commanding presence, intimidating if his temper is roused. He could still outride and outhunt any English dandy or best one in a fair arm wrestle.”

The comment about dandies had stopped him from asking if her grandfather tolerated Englishmen. Her other brother Lachlan lived in Glasgow with Frank’s half-sister. The man loved his wife and family, good scotch, and a rowdy brawl. In that order, Brigid had admitted.

He imagined they were all protective over their bashful sister. To his delight, she was no longer tongue-tied around him. They had longer conversations, interrupted by Lady Brecken or Wilkens for propriety’s sake. Once again, he couldn’t have said what instruments or songs had been played.

The sound of laughter drew his attention back to his surroundings. Frank scanned the park and turned his head in the direction of a small wood. A group had left their carriage along the side of the road and were walking. The same throbbing that plagued him at night began as soon as he spotted her. Brigid wore the apricot pelisse over a sky-blue dress. He recognized Wilkens and Lady Brecken before a flash of orange disappeared into the copse.

He dismounted and joined his friends, acknowledging each with a greeting and nod. “Where did Miss MacNaughton go?”

“A governess was chasing her ward and asked for assistance. Miss MacNaughton offered to help since the elderly woman could barely catch her breath.” Wilkens grinned. “I remember a few pranks I played on my nanny. That boy may need a younger governess.”

Evie rolled her eyes and addressed Frank. “Lord Raines, I’d feel much better if you’d see if they need any help?”

He handed his reins off to Wilkens. “Would you mind tying him to your carriage?” He took off at a jog into the wood, barely hearing his friend’s reply.

Frank followed the sound of voices.

“Young man, your father will hear of this.” An unfamiliar voice.

“I didn’t mean to climb this high. I can’t look down.” Another slight, whiny voice confessed.

“Hold up, I’m coming for ye, lad.” A Scottish brogue.

She’s coming for him? Miss MacNaughton was going to climb a tree?

Fifty yards in front of him, he saw an older woman with dark hair, wearing a prim gray dress and pelisse. Her hat tipped precariously on her head as she glared up at the boy. More than half way up the great

oak, a flurry of leaves revealed a navy-blue shape. His beautiful Brigid, as he'd begun to call her in his dreams, stood at the base of the tree. She untied her bonnet and handed it to the governess. Bending over to reveal a round bottom, she pulled her skirt up and tied a quick knot on one side. At her thigh.

What the devil? He forced his eyes from the stockings that clung to her calves.

With his jaw dropped to his knees, he watched the chestnut curls bounce as she jumped and caught the branch with her hands. She swung back and forth, her petticoats shining like a white flag of truce, until she hoisted herself up and onto the branch so that she perched on her stomach. One knee came up, and she pushed herself upright before reaching for the next branch. Using the trunk for balance and traction for her feet, Miss MacNaughton ascended two more sets of branches.

Frank wasn't sure what appalled him the most: the little minx climbing the tree or the fact her legs were as shapely as he'd imagined.

"What's yer name, lad?" asked Miss MacNaughton.

"George," came the pitiful voice.

"My name's Brigid. Have ye climbed many trees?"

He shook his head. "Not this big. I didn't think I was this high."

"It happens, George. How old are ye?" she asked as she continued to climb closer to the boy.

"Five." He sniffled. "I'm sorry."

"You should be!" yelled the governess.

Frank made himself known. "Ma'am, perhaps the scolding could wait until he's down."

She jumped at his voice. Her hand flew to her chest, eyes wide.

"My apologies, ma'am. I didn't mean to frighten you. Lord Raines at your service." His introduction chased the fear from her eyes. He called up, "Miss MacNaughton, can I be of assistance?"

She froze, her arm in midair reaching for the next branch. "Lord Raines?" came the faint reply.

"Yes, I was wondering if I can help in any way?" A grin curved his lips. He couldn't help it. Her slender ankles, the outline of her backside with her skirt tied at the side, her heaving chest as she peeked down at him, all had his blood boiling.

"If ye'd asked that five minutes ago, I'd have said yes. But it'd be a wee silly to come down now so ye can take my place." Her tone sounded irritated. "Have ye ever climbed a tree?"

"Well, no."

“Then how could ye be of any assistance?”

How much experience did *she* have? “I’ll stand here and catch any falling bodies, then.”

She rewarded him with a giggle and scrambled up another branch. Brigid reached the boy and leaned against the trunk next to him. “George, have ye ever seen monkeys?”

He nodded. “At the circus last summer.”

“Good.” she said with a reassuring smile. “Let’s pretend ye’re a young monkey. When they climb, they hang on to their mother’s back and watch how she moves from limb to limb.”

The boy nodded. “I’ll try.”

Brigid turned her back to him. “Reach up and grab the branch right above yer head. Use it for balance as ye lift yerself up, then wrap yer arms around my neck. I’ll let ye ken when I’m ready, then ye’ll wrap yer legs around my waist. Can ye do that?”

He nodded again, his eyes unblinking.

“Good lad! Now, up ye go.”

“Careful, Master George. Follow her instructions to the letter,” added the governess.

“But I don’t know all my letters yet,” he moaned, panic raising his voice another pitch higher.

“Ye’re fine,” soothed Miss MacNaughton. “It’s only a phrase, like not counting yer eggs before they hatch.”

George rose a bit wobbly, then practically jumped on Brigid’s back, clinging to her neck with his eyes squeezed shut.

The governess gasped, and Frank’s heart stopped for a moment. The boy’s weight pulled Brigid, and she gripped the branch above her to keep them both upright as the duo swayed back and forth. Blast, why hadn’t he been here sooner?

“Ye’re doing a fine job, George,” came the soft brogue again. “Now, I’ve got both hands holding us steady, so wrap yer legs around my waist. Then all ye need to do is hold on.”

Another ten years ripped from his soul as the boy pushed against her shoulder blades with his elbows and threw his legs about her middle, their entwined bodies swaying again as she regained her balance for both of them.

“I don’t feel so well,” said the older woman.

Frank glanced down at the weaving form and caught her as she tumbled over. Holding the prone governess, he kept his eyes trained on the wholly inappropriate rescue still taking place. As Miss MacNaughton

made her way, the boy's face pressed against her neck. Frank watched how easily she scaled one branch and then the next. Almost as if she'd done this before.

Don't be ridiculous.

He laid the unconscious woman gently on the ground, noting she still clutched Miss MacNaughton's apricot bonnet, and centered himself below the pair. The auburn beauty had returned to the lowest point. "George, I'm a friend of your heroine. I want you to let go of her neck and reach for me now."

George peeked at Frank, his red, swollen eyes apparent from this distance. He slowly removed one arm and then the other. He turned his body and hurtled himself at Frank. The viscount caught him with a loud *hmmph* and set him on solid ground. The boy clung to his legs.

The governess groaned. Frank helped her to her feet. She shoved the crumpled bonnet into his hands and brushed off her pelisse and skirts. "I'm very thankful, but we must be off. We're already late. Please, I beg you, keep this our secret." Then she took the boy's hand and hurried off, brushing a few dead leaves from her hair as George struggled to keep up with her.

"See if I rescue her charge again," huffed Miss MacNaughton from above. "Will ye help me too?"

Frank grinned and reached up. "Only if you throw yourself at me like George did."

"That wouldn't be verra proper."

"I'm not sure how proper tree-climbing is."

She slipped down into his arms, her breasts sliding against his chest. Her curls tickled his nose along with the scent of heather. *To the devil!* She felt so good against him. His member hardened, those dreams coming back to haunt him now as the real Brigid wiggled against him. Suddenly, fantasy blurred with reality when her face tipped up to his. The tip of her tongue ran along the seams of her lips.

Frank groaned and dipped his head, his mouth covering hers. She tasted of lemon and honey, and the combination seemed fitting for the woman in his arms. His second groan was louder and rumbled against her lips. Her arms wrapped around his neck, and without thought, he pulled her flush against him. The throbbing between his legs spiraled into molten heat. A hot, consuming desire he'd never experienced before.

"Brigid," he murmured against her neck, breathing in her sweet floral scent, her breath hot against his ear. "By God, I've wanted to do

this.”

He bent his head again and feathered kisses along her jaw and back to her mouth. His lips brushed hers, his tongue running across them, asking for entrance. They parted, and he dipped inside for a better taste. Her body tensed at his exploration, revealing her innocence, even as her fingers dug into his scalp.

Breaking the kiss, he touched his forehead to hers, both of them panting. “I’m sorry if I offended you. I’ve wanted to kiss you for weeks.”

She shook her head. “I’ve been waiting for weeks.”

Frank leaned back and tipped her chin up. “You surprised me today. It took great courage to go up after that boy.”

“He was frightened. That baffleheaded governess couldn’t get him down.” Her eyes were dark and the lids heavy with desire. Add her mussed chestnut hair, and Frank found himself still struggling for control.

“Brigid?” called Lady Brecken.

“Miss MacNaughton, are ye well?” Wilkens’ voice boomed through the trees.

“Here,” she called, pushing away from him. Her hands fumbled at the knot in her skirt. It fell to her ankles just as her friends appeared. He squashed the bonnet over her hair. She tried to tie it below her chin, but it was set at an odd angle. He felt like he was back at Eton, and the schoolmaster had just caught them at something.

“We saw the governess and her charge leave—” Wilkens’ eyes slowly took in Frank and Miss MacNaughton’s disheveled appearance, a smirk growing on his face. “It must have been quite a chase.”

“Indeed! The little rascalion scrambled up the tree and then couldn’t get down.” He took another subtle step away from Miss MacNaughton, noting the suspicion that lurked in both their friends’ scrutiny. “He was meek enough when he clung to someone’s back to come back—”

“You climbed up to get him?” Wilkens asked. He looked at the oak and back at Frank, doubt evident in his brown eyes.

“Surely ye believe a mon as fit as Lord Raines could save a lad in a tree?” defended Miss MacNaughton.

“W-well, I...”

Lady Brecken tucked her hand in the crook of Wilkens’ elbow and steered him toward the walking path. “I think you’re in deep water here, Charles,” she said cheerfully over her shoulder, casting a wink at Miss MacNaughton.

Frank waited to let the distance between the couples widen when Miss MacNaughton pulled on his sleeve.

“Why didn’t ye tell them I was the one who climbed the tree?”

“To save your reputation.” He looked down and found her brows drawn together, deep in thought.

“Is my reputation that important to ye?”

“It’s the priority of any lady I’ve ever met. A ruined woman can never attain a suitable match.” He leaned down and whispered, “Why did you come to my defense?”

“To save yer pride,” she said smugly. “It seems to be the priority of every gentleman I’ve ever met.”

Chapter Six

The Two Sides of Truth

March 1820

Angelo's Fencing Academy

"A friendly assault, no points kept." Henry Charles Angelo announced to the opponents, who both nodded in agreement. "Then we shall begin."

"En-garde." The men took their positions.

"Pret." Epees raised and ready.

"Allez!"

Frank advanced, on the offensive, as was his style. The whistle of blades sliced through air, followed by the *ssssrrt! sssrrt!* of steel against steel. The younger Angelo feinted and scored a hit. Frank engaged again, cursing his lack of concentration when both players ended in a *corps-a-corps*, pushing against one another's swords at an impasse.

Frank thrust his weight forward, then stepped back in almost one movement to disengage and separate their locked blades. He advanced again and this time scored a point. His opponent lunged, Frank parried, and Angelo counter-parried.

Bloody hell!

"Francis, you are distracted."

"Yes, thank you for pointing that out." Frank's chin tilted up, the tip of the blade at his throat.

"My son bested you with little effort," the fencing master goaded.

The older Angelo had been Frank's instructor since Eton, taking the place of the blacksmith in Frank's physical training. Angelo was the second generation of a fencing-family dynasty, his father a renowned Italian master. Besides teaching in over forty schools, he had continued his own father's original academy. Classes focused on cavalry swordsmanship and attracted the patronage of royal and noble families with younger sons entering the military. He had become a celebrity in his own right, and Frank never missed an opportunity to visit whenever he was in London.

Angelo's academy shared a building with Gentleman Jackson's

establishment on 13 Bond Street. The two men appreciated both sports as essential to any gentleman's education and had referred students to each other since the opening of the Academy. The original Angelo had been good friends with Jackson and had given the boxer the idea to open the boxing establishment.

Frank thanked the younger Angelo, now third generation running the Academy, for the practice and began taking off his vest and face mask. He enjoyed the challenge provided, but he missed going against his old master. "How is the retired life?"

"Excruciating, but it was my own fault. Both Edmund and I were out of shape, and I did not follow my own rules." Angelo, over fifty years old, had taken a holiday with his wife. When he returned after months of not fencing, he went to Edmund Keane's home to give the actor a private lesson. Instead, he pulled the muscles in the back of one leg and ended his days as a master. Fortunately, his son had been in training since a child and took over the academy in 1817.

"It was a sad day for all of us when you were forced to retire."

"Ah, but life goes on, does it not? Now, back to you, Francis. What kind of trouble are you in?"

Frank laughed. The man had always been able to read his moods. In fact, Angelo had been more of a father to him than the late viscount. "Nothing dramatic or exciting. I'm here to find a wife. I'm doing well with my estate and properties and feel it's time to start a family of my own."

"Wise man," agreed Angelo. "A good woman can make such a difference in man's life. I know firsthand."

"But *how* did you know?" Frank had no one to turn to in the area of romance. His best friend Charles was not yet interested in marriage. How pathetic was it to turn to a childhood instructor for advice?

"Ah, the age-old question. How do you know if it's love?" He tipped his head and studied his past student. "Is there a particular young lady?"

Frank nodded, wondering how much he should reveal. Then again, what did he have to lose by unloading his worries? "I've met a woman, not the usual debutante, and I believe she would be a good match."

"So you are interested in a *good* match, not a *love* match?"

"In truth, I was only concerned with a match that would suit me and my way of life. I don't care for London, and the woman in question would be somewhat isolated from the usual Town distractions." He sighed. "But I believe I may have found both."

"Does your pulse speed up when you see her?" asked Angelo.

He nodded.

“Do you wonder when you will see her next as soon as she is gone?”

He nodded again.

“Do you believe she is the most exquisite woman you’ve ever met?”

Blast! It’s like he’s in my head.

“Ha! I’m afraid you are indeed in love, Francis, or very smitten.”

“It’s more than an infatuation. She’s such a mixture of shy and bold, beguiling but daring.” Was he gushing? It didn’t matter. Miss MacNaughton had that effect on him. She was constantly changing, showing him a different side of herself. He found himself impatient to see what came next.

“I like conundrums. What’s the trouble?”

“We only met a month ago. There are things I haven’t told her about my background, and I barely know hers.” Would she scorn him for being a bastard? The illegitimate half-brother of her best friend? He didn’t think so, but Miss MacNaughton never seemed to do what was expected.

“Most couples don’t know one another well when the banns are read. They are attracted to each other, have enough in common to provide adequate conversation, and are suited by class.” Angelo pursed his lips and ran a hand over his thinning gray hair. “Does she come from a good family?”

“Her grandfather is a clan chieftain in the Highlands. They have a successful weaving business in Glasgow, owned jointly with the Earl of Stanfeld, her cousin.” Frank hoped to be accepted by the Scots since they were already related to an Englishman. Some of the clans still weren’t friendly to a *Sassenach*.

“Well then, it doesn’t seem class is an issue. Do you dislike Scots?”

“Of course not.” He hadn’t even considered it.

“Does the lady return your affection?” Angelo smiled, getting to the crux of the matter. “For this is all for naught if she doesn’t.”

“I believe she does. Her response to my kiss was... enthusiastic.” The heat rose up his neck, wondering at his own audacity to speak of desire and women to Angelo.

“Ah, then she either is a good actress, or I don’t see a problem.” The fencing master rubbed his hands together. “My parents did not approve of my sweet Mary. Yet here we are, so many years later with no regrets.”

Frank thought of the bashful girl he’d met the first time in Hyde Park, unable to form an entire sentence. The second meeting, she’d met his eye. At the theater, their conversation had been effortless and

constant. Each encounter had revealed another tidbit; it made him hungrier to know more. Yet, Miss MacNaughton in that tree...

He'd sensed a brashness in her, an unapologetic energy. And then the kiss. The kiss that had set his solid feet off-kilter. The voice niggling at the back of his brain, telling him there were many faces to this woman, silenced when their lips touched. It made no difference if there were a thousand more facets to Miss MacNaughton. He would accept each one.

For the first time in his life, Frank had felt at home. It had been the oddest sensation. How could a person convey that kind of comfort?

"Listen to your heart. It knows better than you. We tend to overthink emotions." Angelo clapped him on the shoulder. "Take life as it comes, Francis. If you don't, it will be your only regret in the end."



That evening

White's Gentlemen's Club, London

There was no doubt what was in his heart. If he listened to that, Miss MacNaughton would be married by special license and in his bed before the end of the week. Perhaps there was a compromise. Or was he overthinking it as Angelo had said?

Frank entered White's and handed off his greatcoat and beaver hat. His preferred club was Boodle's, but Charles had wanted to meet here tonight. The footman showed him to the dining room, and his friend waved from across the room. Another gentleman stood at the table, his back to the door. As Frank approached the pair, his gut roiled and twisted. The stranger was tall and blond. By God, it couldn't be—

Sir Horace turned with a smile that froze on his lips. Frank stood several feet away, unable to move. He'd only seen his father at a distance, never face-to-face. He couldn't breathe as they stared at one another, panic in his own eyes and horror in Sir Horace's.

"Uncle, this is my old school chum, Frank. I'm sure you've heard me speak of him. Lord Raines, this is Sir Horace Franklin, my uncle." Charles stood and looked back and forth between the two men. "Lawks, but the two of you could be related."

"I must be going," said Sir Horace, his face pale. "We'll continue this discussion later." The older man turned on his heel and walked away.

"Well, I must say this is odd." Charles resumed his seat and beckoned to Frank to join him. "I don't know what got into my uncle. He's usually

the most jovial of men.”

Frank swallowed, trying to find his voice. His father had just looked him in the eye, gave him his back, and walked away. It was rather anticlimactic. He'd had nightmares of a scene, yelling, disbelief. Definitely words of some sort. Not silence. He'd never imagined silence at their first meeting. Fiddling with his fork, he looked up to see Charles staring at him.

“I can't say as I blame him, though. It must have been like looking in a mirror from the past.” Charles waved at a footman who appeared with a decanter. “You're white as the first snow. Have a drink of brandy and get some color back in your cheeks!”

Frank threw back the brandy in one gulp and held a shaky hand out for more. “Thank you. I did need that.”

“We've been friends for eternity,” began Charles, his tone now serious, “and I believe I may have discovered the first secret you've kept from me.”

Frank noted the furrowed brow and narrowed eyes of his friend. He blew out a long sigh and tossed back the second glass of brandy and banged it on the table. “I'll begin by saying I've only had this secret for a short time.”

He told Charles of his mother's final confession and ended on a hopeful note. “What do you make of it? Is it so awful having me as a cousin?”

“Your mother and my uncle? Well, doesn't that just blow the feathers off a peacock.” His friend shook his head. “This is astounding. That makes my mother your aunt. At least you know most of the family already accepts you. You spent a quarter of your school years at my house.”

“Lady Brecken and her sister? Will they welcome me as a half-brother if their father doesn't?” This had been a concern since he'd met the ladies last year. He'd liked them on the spot, but would their affection continue?

“My uncle is a good man. I imagine he's in shock right now. He will do what's right, and my cousins already hold you in their affections. They have minds of their own.”

“I don't want my father to *do what's right*.” Frank swiped a hand over his face and rubbed his jaw. “I don't need his money. I don't need anything from him, which is why I haven't attempted to contact him. I thought if I could avoid him while I was here...”

“You can't avoid destiny, my friend. Sir Horace is no saint. He's a

shrewd businessman with great common sense.” Charles gave a long, low whistle. “And both of those qualities have his mind whirling right now, trying to figure out who you are and where you came from. If I know my uncle, he’ll have a Bow Street runner finding out exactly what you’re up to.”

“I don’t care if he ever talks to me. I’m here to find a wife and return to my quiet life.” It was a lie, of course. He did care.

The same height. The same hair. The same clear gray eyes that stared back at him every morning in the mirror. Sir Horace Franklin’s blood ran in his veins. He wanted to know the man, learn where he came from, to understand himself better. He wanted to belong *somewhere*. He’d been treated almost as an outcast by his stepfather. What would it feel like to be treated as a *son*?

Admit it! demanded the voice in his head.

Frank pushed back the disappointment at his father’s snub. In a far corner of his mind, he’d considered a relationship with Sir Horace. “He hated the late Lord Raines and will think I’m like him.”

“Why did he hate him? Because Raines married the woman he loved? Obviously, there was something going on between them.” Charles grinned. “Or you wouldn’t be here.”

“Do you think Sir Horace will contact me? Or approach me again?” Frank’s stomach knotted at the thought of their next encounter. “I think the cut direct would be easier.”

“Oh, cheer up. He’ll come round. It’s his wife that I’d be more concerned with. My aunt is not the easiest of women.” Charles wiped his mouth with his napkin and tossed it on his plate. “Let’s go make our fortunes at the tables, and we’ll devise a plan before the night’s over.”

Frank was careful not to overindulge. He lost a bit of coin, learned more about his father’s business, and never came up with a plan. It didn’t make a difference, he told himself. He would court Miss MacNaughton, propose, and retreat.

“Excuse me, sir, but I was instructed to deliver this.” A footman held out an envelope after helping him on with his greatcoat. Frank took it and tucked it away for later. There was no name, no address on the front.

He returned to the Mivart Hotel, and Barker appeared to help him undress. He waved the envelope at his valet. “A bad omen, I wager.”

“I hope not, sir,” Barker answered in his monotone. “Would you like me to return?”

“No, that’s not necessary.” He cracked the wax seal on the back and

unfolded the letter as Barker retrieved Frank's banyan and readied his bed.

I will admit I was flabbergasted this evening when I saw the mirror image of myself. I have my suspicions about you, but I will need to verify this first. I haven't become a successful merchant without listening to my instincts. My gut says there is an ulterior motive for your sudden appearance in London.

We shall see.

In the meantime, I would appreciate some distance between us until I've decided my next step. I also request you avoid my daughter and her guest. I will not have them subjected to any kind of scandal.

No names. He'd left no proof of the author or for whom it was intended. A darkness settled over him. Sir Horace Franklin did not have the right to tell him who to see and where to go. He went too far.

However, Frank reasoned sourly, the man had every right to protect a young woman in his household. A woman related to the family through marriage. In truth, he had no desire to stir the pot. It wasn't in his nature. Angering the baronet would not help Frank's cause with Miss MacNaughton.

Damn! Why did life have to be so complicated? Why couldn't she be staying with anyone other than the Franklins? Miss MacNaughton wouldn't understand his lack of attention. He imagined those deep blue eyes brimmed with tears.

"I can't do it," he said, staring at the note in his hand. "I'll do my best to give you distance, sir, but I will not give her up. She is all that is right in my life."

Chapter Seven

To Swoon or Not to Swoon

Early April 1820
A London Ball

Brigid drew in a deep breath. *Who is this bonny creature smiling back at me?* The dress was stunning. Saxon blue silk with a square, low-cut neckline that left her shoulders bare. A finely woven silver shawl slung over her arms at the elbow provided for some modesty or warmth if she needed it. Her hair was knotted at the crown, a string of paste diamonds woven in and out of the curls that hung down her back. She felt like a princess.

“Oh my,” said Evie. “I knew that color would be perfect with your eyes.”

Evie’s dress was a cinnamon silk with yellow-gold beads sewn on the bodice and along the hem. The colors brought out her honey waves and set off her amber eyes.

“And ye look quite bonny yerself, Lady Brecken.” Her eyes narrowed as she took in Evie’s pink cheeks. “What’s happened?”

“You’ve come to know me so well.” She clapped her hands together and squealed. “Madoc just arrived. He’s dressing now, so he can accompany us to the ball.”

“I’m to meet the Earl of Brecken? I have a Welsh god in my head from yer detailed descriptions.” Brigid grinned. “I hope I’m no’ disappointed.”

Evie smacked her back with a fan. “Stop! He’ll meet us downstairs in the drawing room.”

She hadn’t exaggerated. Lord Brecken was devastatingly handsome and a contrasting dark to Lord Raines’ light. He had deep ochre hair, a closely cropped beard, and hazel eyes that always seemed to smile. Brigid wondered if that was natural or if Evie had put the joy there. He was tall and well-built and adored his wife.

For a girl who had never cared about romance, she suddenly wanted a man to look at her the way Lord Brecken gazed at Evie. With all her

heart and a ferocity that rattled her. What had happened to her since she'd left Scotland?

Sir Horace and Lady Franklin joined them. They were both dressed to the nines. He wore a silver waistcoat with black tails and trousers. She wore an Egyptian brown satin dress with a gold overlay, and rubies at her throat and ears. They made a stunning couple with Lady Franklin's dark, auburn waves and his fair hair and eyes. Brigid wondered if she and Lord Raines looked as lovely standing side by side.

In the carriage, she and Lord and Lady Brecken sat across from the older couple.

"How goes it in Wales, Doc?" Sir Horace asked his son-in-law.

"You should come visit and find out. The tenants were asking about you. It seems you made quite the impression during your visit." Lord Brecken winked at his wife. "You could return for me, Sir Horace, and I'll stay here and monitor the ladies."

"Ha!" bellowed Sir Horace. "This is the only enjoyment I get in my dotage until there are grandchildren to spoil." He wiggled his eyebrows at the younger couple.

Brigid giggled, enjoying the banter. There was a genuine affection between the men. She'd wager there'd been no complications when Brecken had asked for Evie's hand. Without a father, it would be Grandda who would give permission for her to marry. Would he give it freely? She blew out a half snort. They'd sent her all the way to London to make her more "marriageable," so she doubted he'd care who she chose. Except he probably assumed she'd marry a Scot. Grandda was known to get an occasional thistle up his backside. Once he put his foot down, it was hard to change his mind. If he didn't like—

Ye dinna even have a proposal, ye eejit! she scolded herself.

They entered the ballroom of a marquess whose name she'd already forgotten. They ascended the spiral staircase, and Brigid lifted her skirt to avoid tripping. She'd had nightmares about entrances that included a long tumble and exposed petticoats.

She followed Lady Franklin and weaved through the crowd. Brigid hadn't yet attended a crush yet, and this was close enough. Standing back-to-back with people in one hot, airless room didn't appeal to her. It'd be worse than being a sheep in the pen, waiting to be shorn. Uncomfortable, smelly, and nothing to look forward to except freedom.

Brigid decided London had been a good experience for her, but she was ready for the quiet of the country. She missed doctoring her furry friends and arguing with her brothers. She missed young Liam pestering

her all the time. She missed that blanket of love the clan tossed over her every morning and the sun breaking over the mountains.

There had been braw moments, such as her new friends, her first drive through the city, and meeting Lord Raines. Och, but the blethering Londoners, gaudy colors, interminable fittings, and utterly frivolous dialogue ensured the negative outweighed the positive.

The viscount didn't care for London, either. She longed to see Castle Raygin, imagining the grounds and the orangery he had described. To think people—who weren't royalty—grew fruits and vegetables and flowers all year.

Lady Franklin had stopped to greet with Mrs. Wilkerson, and Brigid scanned the room for Lord Raines. He was here; she felt him like a warm breath on the back of her neck. Her hand went there; it had seemed so real.

"I don't believe you've ever looked as stunning. Every woman in this room will be green with envy."

Her breath caught as she twirled to face him. She longed for him to pull her close and kiss her like he had in the woods. *Such a harlot!* She giggled. "Ye look quite dashing yerself, Lord Raines." He wore navy blue tails with a silver and gray-striped waistcoat, and gray trousers hugged his thighs.

"Save me the waltz?" he asked, his eyes darting between her and whatever was behind her. He whispered, "I can hold you the entire dance without handing you off to another."

"Sounds heavenly."

He bowed over her hand and blended into the crowd.

"There you are, my dear," called Lady Franklin to her husband. "Mrs. Wilkerson was just telling me about her daughter's travels."

"Oh, I do hope I don't miss Lavinia's return," said Evie. "I want to hear all about the Continent."

"I believe I took you on an extended trip after our wedding," Lord Brecken reminded his wife as he hovered over her. "Or did I miss a *desired* destination?"

The look in Brecken's eyes and the flush spreading up Evie's neck told Brigid there was a secret meaning to his words. She grinned at her friend, normally so composed, and sympathized. Until a month ago, Brigid never understood the effect a man could have on a woman. It was as if the faeries had sprinkled magic dust, and *poof!* she was at sixes and sevens, tongue-tied, and infatuated.

Later in the evening, she had finished a country set with an older

portly gentleman. He mopped his bald pate with a handkerchief and asked if she'd like some refreshment. The thought of another half-hour with the baron, his sweaty face, and his roaming eyes didn't appeal to her.

"I'd be happy to escort Miss MacNaughton," interrupted Lord Raines. "I'm a bit parched myself."

Her head snapped around; a smile curved her lips. "Oh, yes, er..."

"Well, I know when I'm not wanted," said the baron with a wave of his hand. "Go enjoy yourselves. I remember being that young."

How could the mere touch of fingertips against his sleeve send the wings aflutter in her belly? "Ye saved me. I'm now in yer debt."

"Did I tell you how much I enjoy having the upper hand?"

Brigid laughed. "No, but I had the impression."

"Would you like to get some air? The garden here is one of the best in London." Lord Raines nodded his head toward the veranda, the chandeliers creating shimmers of gold and white in his thick hair.

"That would be wonderful. The reels are great fun, but I'm used to dancing outside."

"Your dances aren't inside a building?"

"Some of them are, of course, depending on the season. Though even in winter, the festivities often spill outside." She gave a sideways glance. "Did ye have bonfires when ye were a boy?"

"I snuck out at Samhain one year and joined the villagers." His eyebrows shot up. "Are your dances like that?"

"Och, no. The bonfires are for warmth. We do often dance around it, but it's no' all wild abandon as ye are imagining, just everyday dances." They stopped on the veranda, and her mouth fell open. "Oh, my. This is beautiful."

The garden had three wide paths that spread out in different directions. The walkway in the center led to a large fountain in the distance, with smaller paths leading away from the watery centerpiece. Flowers and delicate bushes were planted here, allowing visitors to see others as they strolled. On the right was more of the same, but planted with flowering bushes of varied sizes and trimmed into animal shapes. Smaller bushes were birds, squirrels, or rabbits. Larger bushes were dogs, horses, and even zoo animals.

"What's to the left?" she asked, only seeing a dark wall in the distance.

"The hedge maze."

"No! I've read of them but never saw one." She picked up her skirt,

grabbed his hand, and pulled, forgetting all the dull lessons Evie had so patiently drilled into her.

“There’s no hurry. Slow down.”

Brigid stopped at the dark entrance and dropped his hand. “It’s no’ meant for night?”

“They mean to discourage young ladies who don’t care about their reputations.”

Her eyes caught his. “I believe we’ve had this conversation.” The smile slowly turning up his lips made her mouth go dry.

This time, he took her hand and pulled her behind the tall hedge wall. He stopped once inside the shadows and pulled her against him. She breathed in his familiar leather and cinnamon scent while his fingers stroked her cheek. She swallowed and closed her eyes, wondering how her pulse had slid from her neck to her core. The ache between her legs grew as his lips replaced his fingers and trailed hot kisses along her jaw.

His thumb rubbed her bottom lip; his tongue followed. She gasped, parting her lips. Then his mouth was on hers, and a thousand impressions whipped around her like a summer storm until they converged into one thought.

Saints and sinners! I love him.

Brigid wrapped her arms around his neck and hung on for dear life. *This must be swooning.*



The kiss was long and hot and sweet. Frank’s tongue danced against hers, tasting the remnants of the sweet fruity ratafia punch. One hand cupped her cheek, the other pressed against her bottom and pushed her body against his. She moved up on her toes, caressing his manhood already hard with desire. A groan escaped his throat, and she froze, then pulled her head back.

“Did I hurt ye?”

The passion had darkened her blue eyes, but genuine concern was there. He chuckled, feeling her breasts against his chest as he pulled her close again and nuzzled her neck. “Sometimes, a man moans with pleasure.”

“It doesna hurt ye?”

“Kissing?” Could she be that innocent?

“No, this.” Brigid pushed her hips against his crotch. He groaned

louder. "That's no' a happy sound."

"Trust me." He nibbled her ear lobe and feathered kisses down to her collarbone. "It's a sweet ache."

He began another slow assault on her mouth, one hand around her waist, the other skimming up and down her back. Her knees buckled against him, and he held her steady as his fingers traced the line of her cleavage and across the top of her bodice. Her panting increased, and he smiled against her mouth. With a quick dive of his thumb beneath her neckline, he freed her breast.

Her gasp encouraged his ministrations; heat roared through him. His hand kneaded the satin skin, the firm mound that fit perfectly in his hand. He lifted the pink bud to his tongue and traced a circle around it before taking it into his mouth.

God, she was lovely.

Brigid moaned, her head falling back, her chest heaving.

Frank chuckled softly. "Do you understand now?" He licked the taut pink blossom again.

"For all that's holy, ye must put out the fire inside of me."

"I can't do that unless I stop."

Another light groan. "It's the most delicious torture I've ever known."

"I agree." He gently disengaged their limbs and covered her soft mound with reluctance. "There is another way to *put out the fire* as you so eloquently phrased it."

She took his hand, and they walked back to the entrance of the maze. "I'm listening."

"We'd have to be married."

Brigid stopped. Her fingers tightened around his. "What are ye saying... or asking?"

Frank hadn't planned this part of the evening. He hadn't expected his need to be so strong. She calmed his soul and made him stiff with desire at the same time. How was that possible? Never mind, he wouldn't question fate.

Take life as it comes, Francis, and don't hesitate. It will be your only regret in the end.

He would take a risk and heed Angelo's advice. Just roll the dice and see where they land. If she felt the same, so be it. If not, he would no longer dally with her.

"Miss MacNaughton, I would like to court you. Once you've decided we are well enough acquainted, a betrothal would follow. If you are not

interested in marriage, be so kind as to tell me now.”

Her silence was unnerving. Those huge blue eyes stared up at him.

Lawks! He was an unromantic dolt. That was no way to woo a lady.

Then her face lit up in a brilliant smile.

“Does that mean ye can call me Brigid? I hate Miss MacNaughton.”

He laughed and pulled her into a tight hug. “Yes, Brigid. And you may call me Frank.”

Chapter Eight

Confrontations and Clandestine Rendezvous

“Where have you been? Papa was worried when you disappeared after the last set.” Evie stood close to her husband. Brecken didn’t seem to let her get far from his sight.

“I needed some fresh air, so Lord Raines escorted me to the garden.” Brigid’s hand flew to hair, wondering what it looked like. If she’d appeared disheveled, surely Lord—Frank—would have told her. “It’s beautiful. I’m surprised ye didn’t see us out there.”

Lord Brecken rubbed his beard and avoided eye contact. Brigid suspected he was hiding a smile. Evie had told him about Lord Raines!

“You certainly appear to have enjoyed *the garden*,” agreed Evie. “Doc, would you mind getting us some ratafia?”

Relief swept over the earl’s handsome face at the chance to escape the forthcoming interrogation. “I’d be happy to.”

The chandeliers were lovely but expelled so much heat. Or perhaps it was her recent encounter behind the hedge. The ache between her legs had receded but continued as a dull throb. Each time she thought of his lips, his mouth, his tongue... Brigid snapped open her fan. Such a handy wee device. Not that heat was a problem in the Highlands. Oh, the breeze there was wonderful—

Evie snatched Brigid’s elbow and propelled her to an empty corner near an open window. “Tell me what happened, and don’t you dare say *nothing*,” she hissed. “I’m a married woman, and I know when someone’s been kissed. A second time!”

Brigid tried to keep the smile from her face. It was a valiant effort, but fruitless. “He wants to court me if I’m open to marriage.”

She found herself wrapped in a tight hug. “Oh, Brigid, that’s wonderful. I’m so happy for you.” Evie’s brows drew together. “You did agree, didn’t you? You want to marry him?”

“I-I think I love him, so I dinna have much choice, do I?” She drew in a dramatic breath as her friend wrapped her in another hug. “But right now, I can’t breathe.”

“Oh my, I’m so sorry. It’s just so wonderful.” Evie let go and stepped

back. "Do you have any plans?"

"I'm just catching my breath." Why wasn't her stomach in a knot? Why wasn't she panicking at the thought of a betrothal? "My only worry is leaving my home. I just dinna ken if I can do it." Her bubble of happiness popped.

She couldn't imagine living anywhere else. Dunderave, MacNaughton Castle, the Highlands were all part of her.

"Those are details that can be worked out." Evie squeezed her arm, her brown eyes lit with understanding. "I didn't think I could leave London, but Wales is wild and beautiful. If I get homesick, I pack my trunk and here I am. Why couldn't you do the same? It's like having the best of both worlds."

It was something to think about. "I would like to see his estate. Do ye think he would arrange it?"

"I believe Lord Raines will arrange anything you desire if it puts you in the parson's trap." Evie giggled. "That's a term reserved for men. How funny that it could apply to you!"

"I'm glad ye find my dilemma amusing. Let's no' jump over the broomstick yet."

What would her brothers think of him? He was English, but Lachlan was married to Evie's sister. Fenella was only a quarter Scottish, so mostly English. Her own aunt had married an English earl. She would write her ma and Kirsty tomorrow. They'll make sense of it all and broach the subject with the men.



"I asked you to keep your distance from me and my family." Sir Horace stood with fists clenched. "You come to London, snooping around like some bloodhound on the trail—"

"I did no such thing. I've never tried to seek you out. It was an accident we ran into each other at White's and you know it."

"Uncle, please," interceded Charles. "He didn't find out until his mother died. It was a deathbed confession."

"Didn't know what, exactly?" Sir Horace asked quietly, his face drained of color.

So, he wanted Frank to say the words out loud? Put it on his shoulders, rather than take any responsibility of his own. "I didn't ask for this, sir. I was satisfied with my life as I'd known it. However, it seems you had relations with my mother just before her marriage to..."

the late Lord Raines. She carried me in her belly when she said her vows.”

“Did she suffer?” Sir Horace’s voice cracked, and he cleared his throat in an obvious attempt to cover it.

“Lady Raines was ill for a long time. But she died in peace, I believe, after she admitted—”

“I hope the blackguard went to the devil,” sneered Sir Horace. “He was never worthy of her.”

“On this, we both agree.”

Sir Horace paused at that. “You didn’t like your father?”

“My *step*father, as I tell myself now, was a spiteful man with a deep cruel streak. In truth, I was relieved I’m not of his blood.”

“Did he abuse her?”

“Only with words, but they were lethal.”

“He left you broke, then?”

“No, sir. I am plump in the pocket.”

“She died a year ago, and it’s taken you this long to find me?” Sir Horace ran a shaky hand through his thick graying hair. He pinned icy gray eyes on Frank. “Something drove you here, and I’ll find out your sham. I’m leaving London for a few weeks, but when I return, I’ll have more information.”

Frank cast a warning glance at Charles. He didn’t want Sir Horace to know that he’d come last summer, hoping to meet his father. Let the man dig as deep as he wanted. There was nothing to find. Then perhaps they could talk.

“As I said before, I haven’t come to confront you, nor do I have any intention of making this public. I want nothing from you, I’m financially sound, and it would not help either of us.” He paused. “I understand this is a shock for you, as it was for me. Neither of us knew of the other’s existence. I will say in my mother’s defense, though, that her decisions were made in good faith. She thought she’d done what was best for all of us.”

“She was a good woman,” he agreed, his features softening.

“You should also know that I’m quite enamored with Miss MacNaughton. I’ve asked her permission to court her with the intent to marry her. I hope you will not cause her any undue sorrow by showing your dislike for me.” Frank paused, ice forming around his heart. “I will leave our relationship—or lack of—to your discretion. It will not be brought up again. No one but the three of us know, and I promise to give you a wide berth when we are at the same events.”

With that, Frank turned on his heel and left the private parlor. This time he'd been the one to turn his back, though his stomach rolled and his hands trembled. His first words with his father had been in anger. The man considered him a blackmailer, a shammer who wanted something from him.

Yes, I do! he screamed silently. *I want you to be my father and accept me as I am. I want to know my half-sisters and gather together at Christmastide and be a family like the damn stories I read as a child.*

He stopped in a quiet hall and leaned against the wall. After a long breath, he shrugged his shoulders to release the tension. If he couldn't collect himself, he'd need to leave before the promised waltz. Brigid's sapphire orbs and auburn hair flashed before him. She would provide the calm he needed. With his chin up and a smile plastered on his face, he re-entered the ballroom.

"There he is," said Lady Brecken, waving at him with her gold and silver fan. "Did you happen to see Charles? He's disappeared too."

"He's found some fresh debutante to flirt with, I'm sure," said Lady Franklin. "Come to think of it, I haven't seen my husband, either."

As if summoned, the men appeared, both red-faced and sullen. "We must leave, my dear," Sir Horace told his wife. "I have some urgent business to attend to."

"But the cold supper hasn't been served yet," Lady Franklin said, taken aback. "We can't—"

"We can, and we will," snapped her husband.

Lady Franklin's mouth fell open at his tone. She made her goodbyes, put away her fan, and followed her husband without another word.

Frank squirmed inwardly as Lady Brecken studied him and then Wilkens. She was a clever woman. He wondered how far would she push her cousin for an explanation. Would she remember that night last summer? When he'd lost his courage to confront Sir Horace and decided to bury the family secret? Lady Brecken had found him on the balcony. Her sympathy had been more than Frank could bear, and the pent-up frustration had poured out of him.

"Lord Raines, are you enjoying the dance?" she asked, leaning on the white rail that overlooked the garden. The clinging scent of iris and sweet pea overpowered him. The moon was nearly full, but clouds blocked out the stars. "You dashed away so quickly."

"Er, yes, I had to speak to someone." He stood next to her, hands clasped behind his back, trying to think of a reason why he'd just run away from an

introduction to her father. Instead, he changed the subject. "Did I tell you my mother passed?"

Her expression changed from congenial to concern in a heartbeat. "I'm so sorry. No, Charles didn't mention it."

"She had suffered for so long that it really was a blessing."

Miss Evelina placed a hand on his arm. "It's hard to lose a loved one. Is there anything I can do?"

He shook his head, the anger and betrayal thick in his throat. "She told me a secret just before she died." He turned back to the garden, staring into the darkness.

"Unpleasant news?"

He nodded. "What would you do if you found out that your entire world was based on a Banbury tale? The man you thought you were, your life as you knew it was a sham?" Frank swallowed. He hadn't expected that to come out of his mouth. She must think him a blethering fool.

"I don't know. I have never thought about it. I'm sure, whatever it is, she did what she thought was best."

"She lied to me, and she lied to her husband. The man I thought was my father—" He laughed, a harsh sound. "He was unscrupulous in business and not a pleasant man, I'll admit. We didn't get along most of the time, but he was still my father..."

"And yet?" Miss Evelina prodded gently.

He ran a hand through his pale blond hair. "I think of the years I spent caring for her, and my reward was a deathbed confession. But some sins can never be forgiven."

"Did she tell you who your father was?"

Frank looked at her, horrified he'd shared so much. "I must apologize. I had a shock tonight, and I'm not myself. I don't usually rattle on about my affairs."

"I'm glad to listen."

He turned to her, thinking how much he would enjoy getting to know this gracious woman. "Yes, that's why I came to London. I wanted to see him, meet him. Now that I'm here, I don't know. Perhaps it's better to leave the past in the past. What would it change?"

"Does he know he has a son?"

He swiped his hand over his face. "A by-blow, you mean."

"My heart hurts for you, my lord." She sighed. "It must be like the crumbling foundation of a building and one day, the entire structure gives way. Will you contact him?"

He shook his head. "I doubt it, but I apologize again for burdening you

with my woes. I've been brooding over this for weeks..."

"Sometimes it's easier to share your feelings with a stranger. I promise it will go no further." She touched his arm again, and he tensed. "I hope you come to terms with it and find your father."

"Lord Raines?"

His head jerked up at his name. "Yes, Miss Evelina?" He closed his eyes at the misnomer. "I am sorry, Lady Brecken."

"Don't worry, my lord, I'm still not quite used to being Lady Brecken." She crossed her arms. "Before my husband and friend finish the next set, I think we need to clear the air."

"Then let us return to the private parlor." Charles wore a martyred expression and waved an arm to allow Lady Brecken to precede them.

Behind the closed door, she spun on both of them.

"Three men disappear from a ball. One returns, mottled and angry. The next two appear. One is flustered and at wit's end. The other is livid and drags my mother home on the spot. A woman, may I remind you, who rarely submits meekly to her husband's commands." Hands on her hips, she glared at them. "It seems to me, an unpleasant conversation happened between this trio, and I want to know what's going on!"

The responses came at once.

"It's nothing."

"A misunderstanding."

"My father is one of the most even-tempered men I know. Charles, you are the worst of liars. And you"—she wagged a finger at Frank—"have a secret. It's all over your face."

"I'm not at liberty to tell you at this time," Frank said, shaking his head. If Sir Horace did want to attempt some kind of friendship in the future, he couldn't start by breaking his word now. To his surprise, he wanted that. When Frank had mentioned his mother's death, pain had flickered across Sir Horace's face. He had loved Lady Raines. So perhaps there was a chance for the two men she'd loved the most.

Lady Brecken tapped a soft leather shoe against the carpet, lips pursed. Her head cocked to one side, Frank watched her eyes dart from his face, down his length, and back to his face. His stomach plummeted when her soft brown eyes widened. "That night last summer, when we spoke on the balcony, I had the strangest feeling." She tapped her mouth with a forefinger.

Bloody hell! So much for secrecy. His parentage would soon be in the *on-dits*.

“Lord Raines, how old are you?”

That wasn’t the question he’d expected. “Twenty-seven.”

“Thank heavens!” she exclaimed. “It was before he married my mother.”

Chapter Nine

The Best of Intentions

The next morning
Franklin home, London

Brigid threw back the counterpane and stretched. Life was so strange. A few months ago, she had thrown a tantrum over being sent here. Now, she'd throw a tantrum if she was sent back. Though she missed her family and home, Frank was here.

The ball had been dream-like. A fairytale Kirsty would have swooned over. She giggled. Swooning might become a favorite pastime if Frank continued kissing her like last night. Now she understood the glazed eyes and silly smiles she'd seen on others. The sly looks and subtle flirtations that had always seemed so artificial and obvious to her. Yes, love had a power that could change a person with the wink of an eye.

Or the brush of lips.

Or the flick of a tongue.

Brigid shivered and planted her bare feet on the thick wool rug. Something had been amiss at the end of the evening, but she was floating off the ground and couldn't give it much thought. Frank had insisted everything was fine before handing her into the carriage, but even Lady Brecken had been quiet on the ride home. She sighed. It would come to light, eventually.

Frank was picking her up this afternoon for a ride in Hyde Park and then an ice at Gunter's. She'd been there once with Evie and Lady Franklin. It had been a chilly day, and they'd had candied fruits and hot chocolate. Today the sun shone, and she hoped they could have their ices in the square instead of inside the crowded shop. It was difficult to talk when surrounded by so many people and so many conversations.

Evie and Lord Brecken were already eating when she arrived in the morning room. Her family would never believe she was sleeping until seven or eight. She'd always enjoyed the dawn, but these late nights were tiring.

"It's a braw morning," she said, filling a plate with a hearty portion

of eggs, a fat sausage, and some toast.

Lord Brecken smiled. "It is indeed, and already a pleasant temperature. Did you enjoy the ball, Miss MacNaughton?"

"More than I expected. I canna believe the hours kept in Town." She plopped down in a chair, and a maid poured her tea. "I usually rise early and watch the dawn, not see it on my way to bed." She yawned. "See what I mean?"

"I do. I keep the same early hours when I'm at home. I think you'd like the countryside in Wales. It's a bit wild like your Highlands."

"I've never traveled farther than Glasgow until now. Wales is beautiful from what I've read." She sipped her tea. "Have ye come to whisk away yer wife?"

Brecken shook his head. "I'm afraid I only came to saturate myself with her presence and hope it tides me over until her return. It's your fault, you know, Miss MacNaughton."

"Mine? However did I become involved?" She could tell he was teasing by the glint in his hazel eyes.

"She has a mission, you see. And once her course is set, my wife does not waver. I'm afraid Evie won't come home with me until you're either betrothed or on your way back to Scotland." He laughed. "Her determination is admirable."

"Don't you have something else to do, dear husband, other than harangue your wife?" Evie stood and kissed his cheek. "I do believe there are times you appreciate my determination."

The earl's ears turned pink, and Brigid hid her smile in a napkin. He rose and bowed to the ladies. "I'll take my leave before this conversation gets any more scandalous. Behave, ladies."

"Never," they said in unison.



Same morning

Jackson's Boxing Academy

Frank landed with his right just below the jaw, ducked, and followed up with a light left to his opponent's gut. Charles doubled over and lifted one glove as he recovered.

"I thought it was a tap," apologized Frank. He hadn't meant to hurt him; he'd needed a release for his growing tension.

Charles shook his head, then slowly straightened with a lopsided

smile. "I enjoyed the brandy a little too much after I left the ball. Lawks! I thought I'd cast up my accounts for a moment."

"You should have told me." He held out his wrists, and the assistant began untying his gloves. "I can't very well claim a victory after my opponent shoots the cat all over the ring."

"Thank you, my friend. Cousin. Whatever the hell I'm to call you now," Charles added with a smirk. "I must say I'm glad to have you in the family."

"For the moniker, let's just stick with Raines or Frank. Not everyone is so pleased." Frank remembered the anger emanating off Sir Horace last night.

He's in shock, Lady Brecken had said, and needs time to think it through. Our father is a good, caring man. You'll see.

A good, caring man who had practically dragged his wife from the ball rather than have a discussion with his illegitimate son. Granted, they'd all been ill-prepared for the meeting, and it had taken place in a stranger's house. Though it had been a punch to the gut, Brigid had soothed the hurt. Her lovely face and the affection in her eyes were a healing balm.

"What are we going to do? I told Uncle I cannot turn my back on you, regardless of his decision." Charles' face turned a pale shade of green. "I must depart. We'll meet later."

Frank watched him hurry away, a hand clutching his stomach. "Hair of the dog," he called after him.



He had an appointment with Miss MacNaughton soon. Hyde Park and then Gunter's. Between her adorable smile and the famous London sweets, his day was looking brighter.

"I'm meeting a beautiful woman, Barker, so work your miracles." He looked in the mirror, noting his own bloodshot eyes from lack of sleep, and then grinned at his valet's bland look. "Do you like women, Barker?"

"Yes, my lord," he replied.

"Do you *enjoy* women?" Frank wiggled his eyebrows.

"Yes, my lord," he repeated and held up the gray and blue-striped waistcoat.

"I hope this young lady will be my wife," Frank added.

The expression never changed on the older man's face. "Very good,

my lord.”

“Can I ask you a question, Barker?”

“You mean another one? Of course, my lord.”

“Did you like my stepfather?”

“Not at all.”

Even though he asked the question, he’d expected Barker to say he admired or respected the late viscount. The answer made him chuckle. “Then why did you stay?”

“He refused to give me a reference.” Barker’s fingers worked efficiently as he wrapped and tied the snowy white cravat.

Despicable! “Yet you stayed with me. Why?”

“You offered a glowing reference *if* I chose to leave.”

Frank rubbed his jaw. “So, you had an escape if you didn’t like working for me?”

“No, my lord. You treated me as a man.” He paused for only a moment and looked Frank in the eye. “It is every man’s right to make his own choices. You provided that without a second thought. Your father withheld it at the same speed.”

“I’m a fair employer?” Frank asked, trying to understand.

“Yes, sir, but it’s more than that. You are a nobleman with integrity.” Barker refocused his attention on the cravat. “I swore when I was able to leave your father’s employ, I would only procure employment from such a man.”

Frank blinked, wondering if he’d ever heard the valet utter so many words at once. And why did Barker’s opinion fill his own chest with such pride? “I’m going to Gunter’s today. Have you been there?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Do you like the ices?”

“Yes, sir, but I prefer the ice cream over the sorbet.”

“Why?” He realized he knew hardly anything about Barker, and he was suddenly very interested in this reserved man.

“It is creamier, my lord.”

“Hmmm.”

When the toilette was complete, the valet walked to the connecting door and paused. “If you would you like me to create a list of my likes and dislikes, please let me know,” he said in his deadpan voice. “However, I would expect the same in return.”

The door clicked shut, and Frank guffawed. So, Barker had a dry wit. Who’d have thought?



That afternoon
Hyde Park

A light breeze ruffled the lace edging of her bonnet. Brigid wiped her palms on the velvet seat of the open carriage and filled her lungs with the sweet spring air. She was alone with Lord Raines. Birds chirped, squirrels dashed from tree to tree, and her heart soared.

"I wish we were alone," he said, the husky tone sending a shiver through her.

Visions of their kiss last night heated her face. "I do too."

It was everything she could do not to throw her arms around him and plant her mouth on his. If only she were at home, where these strict proprieties were meaningless. The Scottish handfasting ceremonies had only fallen out of practice in the last hundred years. A kiss in public wouldn't shock her family or any of their neighbors. But she wasn't in Scotland, and Lord Raines was a proper Englishman.

Her conscience poked at her again at the word *proper*. Brigid needed to tell him that she wasn't a demure or gracious lady. She would be honest and admit that she climbed hundreds of trees in her lifetime, competed against her brothers in foothill races, rode her pony bareback and astride, strung a bow faster than many of the village men, and beat them in most competitions. She couldn't cook well, hated sewing, and until London never cared about her appearance.

Saints and sinners! Ye'll scare him off faster than a hawk snatches a rodent.

As she considered remaining silent, a discussion with her mother came back to her.

"I dinna see my grandmother bowing to her husband. And he's the clan chief."

"Ha! Ye're right. She was never weak, but her behavior was a wee different when they first met. Yer grandfather was a good mon but arrogant. She eased her outspoken ways into the marriage."

They rode past other vehicles, nodded, and waved at familiar faces before Frank pulled to the side. He parked near the woods where they'd kissed. Her belly churned with excitement. Did he mean to kiss her again? Unless all her flaws sent him running. For the first time in her life, she didn't want to push a man away. Yet, her candid nature insisted

she be forthright.

She would listen to her mother and ease into it. Give him one piece to the Brigid MacNaughton puzzle at a time.

"I have a confession," she blurted.

"It sounds ominous," he said, eyebrows raised. "Tell me you're not secretly married."

"Och, no!"

"Then there is nothing else that could sway my opinion of you." He winked. "Unless you are in love with someone else?"

She was in love but not with someone else.

He looked over his shoulder before brushing his lips against her cheek. "Tell me your worst flaw."

"I'll tell ye one but perhaps no' the worst. I climbed more trees than I can count," she said, eyes downcast. *Ease him into it*, warned the voice in her head. "As a child." *Truth*, she thought.

"I don't doubt it with three brothers and no sisters. You'll have to do better than that." He hopped down from the carriage and looped the reins over the brake. "Care for a stroll?"

"Oh, yes." He walked around and held a hand to assist her. She ignored it. "I'm feeling a wee dizzy. Perhaps you should grip my waist and help me down."

With a grin, he raised his arms and lifted her by the waist and lowered her oh-so-slowly to the ground. Her body slid against his as he set her feet on the grass. "How was that? Or should we try it again?" he murmured in her ear.

She closed her eyes; that familiar movement began in her belly. It was like a harp's strings inside her, and Frank's fingers were making the music. He lifted her hand onto his arm. She opened her lids to find him studying her, caught the vulnerability in those silver orbs.

Her hand reached up to brush a stray lock from his forehead. "There's a troubled soul hiding in there."

He gave a harsh laugh. "Will you cast out my demons?"

"If there's no' too many." Her hand slid over his shoulder and down his sleeve. "Will I need reinforcement? How beset are ye?"

He caught her hand and pressed the gloved fingers to his lips. "I believe destiny sent you to me. If you cannot dispel the dark cloud over me, then it's an impossible task."

They strolled along the walking path, stopping on occasion when Brigid caught sight of a squirrel or bird or saw a particularly pretty flower and showered him with trivia about each species.

"You're quite knowledgeable on animals. Do you have many of your own?" he asked, the haunted look gone.

"Aye, and take care of the sick or injured for most of my cl-family." She raised her face up to the sun and thought of the small swimming loch where generations had sunbathed on the same boulder. "Do ye swim?"

"Yes. I've gone to Bath and enjoyed the water. And you?" he asked, waving at a passing carriage.

She nodded. "I enjoy being outdoors as much as I can."

"I imagine that isn't often. Your household duties must keep you inside much of the time."

"Weel, my mother and grandmother run the household." Brigid sent a silent apology to Mother Mary for the wee lie she was about to tell. "I help in the kitchen and with the livestock."

He peered at her, a smile forming on his delectable mouth. "You're not a traditional English wife, are you?"

Brigid shook her head, relieved that he didn't find the idea appalling.

"As long as you don't best me at some manly task, I don't care."

She let out a loud sigh of relief and he laughed. "I canna cook except for tarts, and I hate to sew."

"I have servants for that. You only need to direct them, and they will complete the tasks for you."

"What do ye enjoy?" She prayed it wasn't the bow.

"I box and fence."

A vision of Frank without a shirt, holding up his fists, made her knees go weak. "Ye're safe from me in those areas. Are ye any good?"

"I like to think so," he admitted. "I began boxing at the age of five."

"So ye like to fight?"

He laughed. "Not really. The late viscount wasn't... a kind man. He used words as weapons and assaulted me and my mother whenever he could. I wanted to be able to best him when the chance came. Come to my mother's defense."

"Did you?" This explained the discord she'd sensed between him and his father.

"At thirteen. It was one of the most pleasurable moments of my life." His jaw tightened.

"That's a long time to wait. Was he surprised?"

"He considered me a coward and a dimwit. Being witness to the consequences of his words, I always thought before I spoke. He took my silence as fear and stupidity."

“What did your father do when ye struck him?” She tried to imagine one of her brothers punching Grandda. Even at his age, the MacNaughton’s fist was powerful enough to send her brothers reeling.

“Sent me to Eton. I hated him but loved the estate and didn’t want to leave.” His eyes dulled, reminding her of a thick London fog. “My mother wanted to shield me from him. It was a good move.”

“And that’s where ye met Mr. Wilkens?”

“Yes, we declared ourselves friends for life at fourteen.” The fog lifted. “I spent half my holidays at his house. Some of my best memories are with the Wilkens.”

Brigid’s eyes burned, and she blinked. This wonderful man and his mother had been browbeaten by a selfish father and then sent away. He’d had to find happiness with another family. She rose up on her toes and kissed his cheek. “I canna imagine growing up as ye did. I was always surrounded by people who loved me.”

“I envy you. In my opinion, appreciation of family outweighs cooking or sewing skills.” He turned and faced her, pinning her with a searching gaze. “More than anything else, I want a family. I want a woman who will stand by my side through the painful moments as well as the joyful ones. I want children surrounding me and a happy wife.”

“That’s a blissful portrait ye’re painting. What about arguments?” She wondered if anyone could live up to his ideas.

“As long as they’re followed by laughter or”—Frank pulled her into the copse of trees, gently pushing her against the trunk of a large oak —“this.”

His mouth covered hers, his palm cupping her cheek. She sighed into his kiss, hands pressing against the hard muscles of his chest. His free hand slid down her waist and rested on her hip, pulling her into him. She could feel his hardness, those harp strings vibrating in her womanly parts. When his hand moved between them and cupped her mound, she moaned into his mouth.

Saints and sinners! His tongue continued its dance with hers; his hand massaged the ache between her legs. Heat roared through her body, and she clutched his waistcoat, afraid of crumpling into a heap at his feet. His hand moved back to her hip, and she felt his manhood, stiff against her skirt. He broke the kiss to leave a trail of fire across her jaw and down her neck.

“Do you have any idea what you do to me, Brigid? You invade my dreams when I close my eyes and enter my thoughts upon waking,” he rasped against her ear. “You make me forget myself, forget propriety.”

“Shall I apologize?”

“Never,” he growled.

She closed her eyes and let out a long breath.

“I may use yer own words against ye one day. I’m no’ a proper Englishwoman. I’ll never understand all the intricacies of yer world.” Brigid placed a hand on each cheek. “Be warned: MacNaughtons love with a fierceness and loyalty that, once given, is for always. And I think I’m falling in love with ye, my lord.”

“Think? By God, I’ll make you certain.” He crushed her body against his and kissed her. Hard. Demanding.

Her fate was sealed.

Chapter Ten

The Devil's Own Scrape

*Several days later
Franklins' home*

"A letter arrived in the post for you, Miss MacNaughton." The butler held out a small silver tray.

"Thank ye." Brigid took the envelope and recognized her brother's handwriting. Her brows furrowed. "It's from Lachlan in Glasgow."

She broke the seal, foreboding slithering into her stomach. Her brothers didn't write unless the sky was falling. Casual correspondence was unheard of by any of the MacNaughton men.

Sister,

Dinna panic because I am writing. There is bad news, but we are all fine. There was a fire on 1 April at the mill. Fenella and our cousin Colin were working at the time and helped get the employees out of the building.

Aunt Maeve, Gideon, and Lissie arrived the morning of the fire for reasons I'll share later. Lissie rescued two of the children working that day and is now ailing from the smoke. The physician said for her to rest here a good month. Knowing the two of ye are close, we thought ye should be advised. Please pass the news on to Fenella's sister. A letter from my wife will follow.

Lachlan

Evie gasped. "How horrible."

"Och, our poor Lissie has been through so much."

Lissie had been part of the bargain that ended the feud between the MacNaughtons and the Craigs. The marriage of Brigid's grandparents, binding Calum MacNaughton and Peigi Craigg, had been the initial peace. To ensure the oath was kept, the newly married couple pledged one of their sons to marry a woman from the Craigg clan. But the couple only had two daughters, so they postponed the marriage for one

generation and betrothed their grandson, Ian, to Lissie when they were but bairns.

The butler appeared again. "Lord Raines has arrived."

Frank entered the drawing room, handsome in a soft gray riding coat and breeches. He handed his hat off to the butler. "Good day, beautiful ladies."

"We've had the most dreadful news." Brigid ran to him, her fingers gripping his sleeve. Just having him near calmed her nerves. The three sat down, and she told of him of the letter.

"How bad is the damage?" he asked, concern etched in the lines around his eyes.

"I have no idea. As ye can see, my brother is a mon of few words." Brigid waved the paper. "I can read between the lines, though. Lissie needs her kin there."

"Your aunt and cousin are there, correct?" Frank narrowed his brows. "Are they not family?"

"No' like I am. They never visited the castle while my English uncle was alive." She shook her head. "He didna like the Highlands. So, Lissie didna meet them until after my brother's death last summer when they came to mourn. They got along so well, Lissie returned to England with Aunt Maeve as a companion."

Brigid stood and began pacing. "I need to go to Glasgow."

"Have you been exiled from London?" asked Lord Brecken from the doorway. "And I thought you were behaving so well."

"Shush," said Evie, then told him of the fire.

"I see a plot in your eyes, wife," Brecken said. "The answer is no."

"Pish and petunias!" she exclaimed. "As a married woman, I can accompany Brigid to Glasgow *and* see my sister Fenella."

"If I could escort you, it would be different. Unfortunately, I must return to Wales." Brecken frowned at his wife. "I was hoping you would accompany me."

Evie's brown eyes narrowed. "Lord Raines..."

"He does not want to traipse across the country with two obstinate women." The earl crossed his arms over his broad chest. "I wouldn't ask it of my enemy, let alone a friend."

Brigid saw the slight flush and pleasure in Lord Raine's silver eyes at the other man's mention of friend. "He could meet my brother and Scots cousin. We'd have an easier time getting acquainted without the crowds of London."

"I'd be delighted to escort the ladies to Glasgow. My estate is near

the border.” Frank smiled at Brigid. “We could stop there on the way or upon our return.”

“That sounds wonderful... Frank,” she said, suddenly shy. The idea of seeing his home, the rooms he’d walked through, the fields he’d ridden across as a boy and young man. Her heart pounded at the thought of being in a place he knew so intimately. She’d learn so much about this man. “Please, Lord Brecken, can ye no’ spare her another month or so?”

Evie yanked on her husband’s sleeve and whispered something in his ear. A slow smile tipped the corners of his mouth. “You’re very persuasive, love. I’ll allow it only if Lord Raines is sure he doesn’t mind accompanying you.”

“It’s my pleasure,” the viscount replied, his gaze on Brigid.

Oh, how she wanted to throw her arms around him and kiss him. Heat spiraled up her neck at the thought. Instead, she gushed, “I’m thankful, my lords. Shall we leave tomorrow?”



Two days of packing. If it had been up to Brigid, she’d have tossed a few dresses in a traveling bag, jumped on the back of a fit horse, and been off. Evie was not a light traveler, nor would she allow Brigid to go without at least half the clothes Aunt Maeve had paid for. Now she sat in the post-chaise, wishing she was anywhere but imprisoned in this coach. The velvet pouch hung around her wrist like a reticule, and her other hand rubbed the stone inside. Her grandmother had been right; the smooth rock provided comfort and had become a habit.

The conveyance was small, fast, and bright yellow. It reminded Brigid of a bumblebee. She envied the postillions, steering the horses while sitting on their backs rather than driving from a high bench seat. The “post-boys” she’d seen were all older men wearing identical uniforms of white breeches, short yellow jackets, and a beaver hat. They wore iron bands on their right calves to protect their legs, riding the horses on the left of the foursome. Each handled a pair with the more experienced man in front.

Their luggage was stacked on top of the chaise and in the front space where a driver would have been. The maid Louella and Barker, the viscount’s butler, rode in the back on the outside bench. Fortunately, the weather had been pleasant so far.

Her eyes drifted to the open slats of the carriage. Frank rode next to

them, his fawn breeches hugging his muscular thighs. She wondered what they looked like beneath the material. A Scot often wore his kilt, never modest about showing bare skin. Her stomach jumped at the thought of Frank in a kilt. Now *that* would make her swoon, she was certain.

"He knows you're watching him," said Evie, never taking her eyes from the book she held. "You're a wanton woman in love. I know because I've been one myself."

"And ye're no longer?" she asked with a grin. "That's a lot of haver."

"Nonsense, you say?"

"Aye," Brigid confirmed.

"Yes, I'm still wanton, but it's legal now. I have a marriage certificate to prove it." Evie squinted out the window. "I'm glad to see he wore his sword. Highwaymen have been worse close to the border."

"We could be set upon?" Brigid hadn't considered this. Lord Brecken was wise not to let them travel alone. "Have ye ever been robbed?"

Evie shook her head. "Goodness, no. I'd probably faint dead away. My life is exciting enough, thank you."

Brigid returned to the view between the slats and sighed. Frank sat straight and tall like a soldier, sword bumping against his leg and a pocket pistol tucked in his boot. She'd also seen him slip a second pocket pistol in his back waistband.

Evie glanced up from her book. "Are you in love with him?"

The question took her aback. "I'm no' sure."

"Pish and petunias. I didn't think you were afraid of anything."

Brigid shook her head. "It's no' so much fear as caution. Something that does no' come naturally to me. Love seems such a daunting emotion. Half the time my stomach is in an uproar, or my face is as red as Kirsty's hair, or my heart is racing like I just finished a footrace and won." She blew a breath out as her eyes once again strayed to the man in question, his blond hair gleaming in the sunlight beneath the black beaver hat. "It's exhausting."

Evie laughed. "Yes, it can be, but the reward is endless." She peeked out the window and squinted up at the sun. "I'd guess we have another hour or two before we stop. The driver said he knew of a reputable inn where we can change horses, spend the night, and have a good meal."

The previous night, they'd stopped at a coaching inn near Manchester. The mattresses had been lumpy but clean, with no bedbugs. Roasted fowl directly from the spit and fresh bread had filled their bellies, and the wine had made her eyes heavy. Even the deep timbre of

Frank's voice couldn't hold her lids open. She and Evie had fallen asleep quickly. When she woke this morning, she wondered how a person could be sore from just sitting. Her muscles didn't ache like this from riding horseback.

One more overnight stop, and they'd be in Scotland. She longed to hear the familiar accents again.

Brigid marveled at the difference in pace between the coach she'd taken from Edinburgh to London and the post-chaise they occupied now. They stopped frequently to change horses and post-boys and it reduced the journey by three days or more.

They rumbled along. A pleasant breeze ruffled Evie's auburn curls as she napped, her head tipped back against the leather squabs. Brigid observed the countryside, passing pastures dotted with sheep or cows, a copse of wood, a stream or river. The land was so... manicured compared to the Highlands. Beautiful, yes, but it didn't inspire her like the rugged mountains and lush glens where she'd grown up.

The lead post-boy called out, and the vehicle slowed to a stop. Something blocking their way, perhaps? She peeked out and saw a boy about young Liam's age standing in the middle of the road, waving his arms. He had wild dark curls, huge brown eyes, and wore filthy patched clothes of rough wool. Apprehension washed over her. Frank, still in the saddle, trotted to the window.

He leaned over and warned them, "Don't leave the carriage. I don't like this."

She nodded and glanced over at Evie, who was now awake and wide-eyed.

"Do ye think ye cursed us?" Brigid asked with a smile, trying to lighten the fear in her friend's soft brown eyes.

"I hope not." Evie moved over next to Brigid and gripped her hand. "Let me rub that stone of yours."

Brigid nodded and was about to take the pouch off her wrist when a male voice shouted, "Stand and deliver!"

"Oh, heavens." Evie gripped the arm strap and squeezed her eyes shut. "I *did* curse us with talk about highwaymen."

"Ye did no such thing. Deep breaths, Evie, and dinna put yer head out the window," whispered Brigid as she tried to hear what was happening outside. "Shush so I can hear."

"Get off the horse, Yer Lordship," ordered a strange voice.

"Why do you think I have a title?" asked Frank.

"A common man can't pay fer the likes of a post-chaise. If ye can

afford this, there's more to be had." The ruffian shouted out orders, cutting off Frank's response.

"From the leader's commands, I'd say there's at least three of them." Brigid mentally counted the weapons. Frank had two pistols and a sword, and the postillions each carried a firearm. Would they have the chance to use them?

A scruffy face peered in at them, his foul body odor assailing their nostrils before he did. "Out o' the carriage, me ladies," he cackled, a bulbous nose dominating a face of gray teeth and greasy dark hair.

Evie pressed her lips together but said nothing, only looked to Brigid. No tears, no hysterics.

Good lass! Brigid thought. Now to stall their exit and give the men time to take care of these scurvy rats.

"I believe I'll stay where I'm at," Brigid said with a bright smile. "I dinna like the company out there."

The chaise began swaying. They could hear Louella whimper as she and Barker climbed down from the bench. Silence, then a scream, and the maid appeared at the window. Another older man, two teeth missing in his leering smile, held her by the hair and shoved her face at the carriage window.

"Ye come out now, and I'll leave her alone. Ye wait, and I'll 'ave some fun with her afore I kill her." He chuckled and spit to the right. "Yer choice, me lady."

Brigid locked eyes with Evie and whispered, "Stay calm. These men will thrive on yer fear. Understand?"

Evie nodded.

Gray Teeth opened the door, and the ladies exited. Standing in the gloom of a forest, Brigid scanned the area for a weapon or an escape. To her left was Frank, off his horse with hands up and a scowl on his face as his jaw twitched. Both postillions mimicked the viscount. A giant of a man with a flat face, bald head, and twisted nose held a pistol on the men. He sported one of the postillion's hats. His homespun clothes with the shiny silk on his head almost made him look comical. But not quite.

Her mouth went dry.

The lad who had stopped them was digging through their trunks and bags. A true babe-of-grace, she thought. He appeared barely five or six with a round, innocent, grubby face that could fool anyone. But when his light brown eyes darted up at her, she saw the fear. He blinked back tears, swallowed, and returned to his task. As he rummaged among the valuables, his small hands trembled. Was he as much a hostage as they

were?

On her right stood Evie and Barker the valet, whose expression remained bland as he stood with his hands up.

Brigid held her breath as Twisted Nose walked behind the two post-boys. "Watch the hoity-toity one for a blink, would ye? I need to reduce the numbers."

Missing Teeth backed away from the group, his arm around Louella's waist to pull her with him. He swung his pistol back and forth between the viscount and Barker. "Go ahead," he called to the huge ogre.

Twisted Nose tucked the gun in his waistband, reached up, and smacked the two postillions' heads together. They crumpled to the ground, and he took his pistol back out of his waistband. "That's better. Now me head won't ache from lookin' back 'n' forth."

"See what 'appens when ye don't listen?" asked Missing Teeth, lips close to Louella's ear, his fist still gripping her light brown curls as he nodded at the prostrate forms. He chortled at her answering whimper.

"My grandda always said men who hurt women were cowards. If ye're enjoying the poor girl's pain, then I'd imagine ye'd fall into that category." Brigid sneered. "It's bad enough ye're taking what doesna belong to ye."

"Listen to the Scottish lass." Gray Teeth waved the pistol in her face. "I like a woman with bite. I may save ye fer meself."

"Looks like an even number of women for us, eh, Bull?"

Twisted Nose turned his black gaze on Evie, and a slow grin curved his mouth. "Aye, she's to my liking. We'll be livin' in clover fer awhile wi' a soft doxy to keep us warm at night."

Evie's voice surprised everyone. "I'm warning you to release us. My husband is—"

"Dead," interrupted Frank, holding Evie's gaze. "She was cut off by the heir with some fancy legal maneuvers. The poor chit only has what's in her bags, though she still pretends she's a woman of position. And the other is her churlish companion. She has no money and is a hell cat when you stoke her temper. I'm being paid to deliver them safely out of England."

Frank nodded at Brigid, now pinning her with dark stormy eyes. "Keep your mouth shut and don't start anything. I'm tired of your constant complaining and don't want any trouble. They can have what they want, and we'll be on our way. The sooner we're over the border, the sooner I can collect my fee."

Brigid's mouth flattened, and she glared daggers at him, playing her

part. They'd ransom the women if they thought there was a chance at bigger stakes. And this ploy might just keep Gray Teeth from using the ladies against Frank.

Is he asking me to distract the men? He'd never reach his pistol or sword with the beefy ogre watching him.

So she screamed. The loudest, highest-pitched, glass-shattering scream she could conjure. They all stared at her. And then... *Click!*

Brigid looked over her shoulder to see Frank with his gun aimed at the giant.

"Drop your pistol and don't pretend you've got the safety off. I'll shoot you as soon as you try anything," Frank said in a steady voice, waving at the boy to join the giant. Twisted Nose dropped his weapon. "Let the women walk away, and I won't kill him."

Gray Teeth guffawed. "Do ye think I care? He's no kin to me, though he's good to have around in a fight. I kinda like the boy, though." He turned back to Brigid. "I'm more concerned wi' this one. A wild card, she is."

Brigid held back a shiver as the man licked his lips. His grimy hand reached out to stroke her cheek. Without thinking, she grabbed his fingers and bent them backwards. A trick she'd learned as a child when her brothers liked to pulled her braids and not let go.

"Why, ye li'l whore." He backhanded her, then smiled when her head snapped back and her eyes watered.

"Touch her again, and you'll die," came a soft threat from the front of the carriage.

But with the threat came Twisted Nose's chance. He leapt forward, and Frank turned in time to pull the trigger. The man fell to his knees, clutching his chest near his shoulder. A look of shock washed over his face as he stared at the blood on his fingers. The boy turned tail and ran into the woods.

"I'll kill ye fer that," the big ogre mumbled and stood, one arm dangling at his side. He advanced on Frank who had no time to reload.

Ssssk! He drew his sword and circled around Twisted Nose, intent darkening his steely eyes. The giant lunged at him; Frank jumped back and tripped on one of the unconscious postillions. He lost his balance, just stumbling out of reach as Twisted Nose swiped at him. The great paw caught the end of Frank's sword and sent it flying. Blood dripped from Twisted's hand, and he wiped it against the red already spreading across his shirt. He advanced, a bloody giant with blind rage glittering in his eyes.

"While they're enjoyin' themselves, let's get back to our conversation." Gray Teeth's fingers gripped her chin and squeezed. "Ye'll be my Scotch warming pan tonight, *lassie*. Learn to play nice or suffer the consequences."

Evie growled next to her and began pummeling Gray Teeth with her fists.

Louella wailed.

"Shut yer bloody chops, or I'll put a lead ball in yer pretty face," sneered Missing Teeth, pointing the barrel at the maid's head. The fingers of his free hand inched her dress up until he found bare skin. Silent tears rolled down Louella's face.

"Ye got something to say, ol' man?" he asked Barker.

The valet leveled his stare on the man and never blinked. "Yes, sir."

"Sir?" Missing Teeth snickered, his hand sliding down the maid's thigh. "Say it, then."

"You will die today, sir."

Silence. Then both ruffians cackled.

The grip loosened on Brigid's chin. Gray Teeth's hot, foul breath washed over her skin, and she held back the gag. "I'm no' done wi' ye yet, girlie. Behave yerself."

Brigid nodded and blew out a breath, her hand cradling her stomach. For all her bravado, her stomach threatened to release her breakfast. Gray Teeth's eyes followed her hand and focused on the velvet bag. Before she could put her arm behind her back, he reached out and snapped the pouch off her wrist. She clutched her burning skin, cursing him in Gaelic.

"It's heavy," he said, swinging the bag. "Must be worth something."

"No!" she cried, realizing her mistake as the word slipped past her lips. Frank turned at the sound.

"Look out!" yelled Evie as the giant swung at Frank. The viscount ducked, jabbed a right to the gut, and moved away.

When the Gray Teeth opened the bag and peeked inside at her grandmother's precious stone, Brigid snapped. She hated bullies, and she hated being bullied. Even more, she hated feeling helpless. With the bloodcurdling cry of a banshee, Brigid charged the brute, arms straight out to push him off balance. He remained upright, but she managed to push him backward into a tree. His arms went around her, and Brigid jerked her knee up with all her might. She pushed away as Gray Teeth doubled over with a loud moan. Grabbing her pouch from his slimy grip, she fisted it in her palm and slammed it on the brute's head. With a

moan, his head slumped to his chest.

Brigid turned to see Missing Teeth staring at his accomplice, his mouth hanging open. Behind him, Barker calmly reached under and behind his coat and pulled out a small pistol. He removed the safety and cocked it, carefully aimed at the back of the villain's head, and pulled the trigger. At the sound of the *click*, Missing Teeth turned, teetered, and crumpled to the ground with a small hole in his forehead.

Louella sobbed and threw herself into Barker's arms. He held her tight, stroking her hair with one hand, still holding the gun in his other, and nodded to the ladies. The only show of emotion was a slight quirk at the corner of his mouth.

But Brigid's attention was on Frank, dancing and jabbing and tiring out Twisted Nose. The beast was panting, blood oozing from his wound and dripping from his hand. Red splattered Frank's shirt and face, and one eye was swollen shut. The giant took another lumbering swing, and Frank planted a facer that sent him crumpling to the ground.

The postillions cheered. Frank, breathing hard, glowered at them. "When did you come round?"

"Just in time to see that devil go down. Well done, my lord," said the lead post-boy.

Brigid ran to him and wrapped her arms around his neck. "Ye were brilliant," she said, silently cursing the tears that threatened to spill.

"What shall we do with that one? He's getting away." The younger postillion pointed to the man hobbling toward the tree line.

Frank reached behind him and pulled out his spare pistol. "I never had time to ready this." He did so and leveled it, aiming at the staggering highwayman. He fired.

He missed.

The older driver held out his own weapon. "I'm a terrible shot. Take mine, my lord."

"Do ye mind?" Brigid asked, taking it before Frank could reach for it. It was a choice between his pride and making sure the scoundrel didn't get away. She pointed the barrel, aimed for the cur's leg, and squeezed the trigger. Gray Teeth went down.

Chapter Eleven

Unexpected Company

A squire and his sons came across the commotion just as the last shot rang out. They tied the big man's hands and left him on the ground, not sure if he would survive or not. The other scoundrel was tied to a tree, and the squire promised to lead the constable and a surgeon to the highwaymen when they arrived. Frank gave him any pertinent information and the direction of their overnight stop. If the party was needed to stay an extra night to answer questions, they only had to send word. Frank wanted to get the women to the coaching inn and away from this terrible scene.

After the squire's party left, Barker produced a clean shirt and waistcoat so the viscount wouldn't have to enter the inn blood-spattered. Frank had washed up the best he could and cursed his trembling fingers as he buttoned his waistcoat. He'd been terrified for the women and the possibility he couldn't save them. With the catastrophe past, his body's reaction was catching up with his emotional state. He was still trying to figure out when Barker had begun carrying a weapon.

As they prepared to leave, Brigid came out of the woods with the small boy who had been used as the decoy. Frank put his hands on his hips and frowned at the tear-streaked face. "Should we tie him to a tree?"

Brigid had put her arms around the boy. "No, he's a victim the same as us."

"He says." Frank wasn't as trusting as Brigid, but right now, he couldn't deny her anything. Besides, the child couldn't do much harm at this point. "How do you know?"

"He just turned five. How evil can ye become in that short of time?" She looked down at the trembling lad, clinging white-knuckled to her hand. "Besides, I saw the fear in his eyes and his hands trembling when he went through our trunks. He was as unwilling as we were."

And so, their party had increased by one. Or one-half as Lady Brecken joked. The coaching inn was comfortable, with decent food and

fresh mattresses. They ordered a meal in a private dining room and ate together. The lad had crammed some bread and cheese in his mouth, lain down on the rug in front of the fire, and fallen asleep.

Mostly they ate in silence, each in their own thoughts, reliving the afternoon debacle. If someone began a conversation, they all added to it at once. It had been a strange but bonding meal, taken while seeing each other in a new light. There were no titles or class delineations as they ate. They were five victims who had shared an experience that would forever link them together.

The maid had attached herself to Barker's side, and he walked her to her room when the ladies retired. Frank carried the child to the kitchen, where the owner had given him permission to sleep. If the boy ran off, so be it. If not, they'd decide what to do with him in the morning. The only information they'd gotten from him before he fell asleep was that his name was Boy-O, he thought he was almost five, and he'd been sold to the highwaymen over a game of dice.

Frank headed to his own room, anxious for the hot bath that awaited him. As he made his way down the hall, he heard a soft sob and paused. Was this Miss MacNaughton's room or Lady Brecken's? It didn't matter, he supposed, if he could help. He tapped on the door, and the crying stopped abruptly.

"Who is it?" the voice asked close to the door. It was Brigid. She'd been so brave and held back the tears until she was alone.

"Lord Raines. Are you all right?"

The door cracked open. "I'm s-sorry. I didn't realize I was so loud." She sniffed and wiped her nose with her sleeve. She wore a thin nightshift, her long curls mussed and loose.

"I have remarkable hearing. Can I do anything?"

Please, let me hold you, his mind screamed.

"Would ye like to come in for a moment?" she asked, opening the door wider.

The stress of the day caught up to him as he took in her appearance. He entered, and her tear-streaked face sent a dagger to his heart. The blue eyes were dark and red-rimmed, her lips swollen, but she was alive and safe. That fact alone made her even more beautiful to him.

Frank opened his arms, and she stepped against him, pressing her face to his chest. She sobbed quietly while he rocked her and brushed back her thick tresses. Letting the silken strands slide through his fingers, he murmured comforting words in her ear and stroked her back.

"Do all the MacNaughtons have such courage or did you get the

lion's share?" he asked when she calmed and hiccupped.

Brigid took his offered handkerchief and blew her nose twice.

His knuckles stroked the light bruise emerging along her jaw. "I've never killed a man, but I could have today." The helplessness had been excruciating. He bent and kissed the purpling skin. "When he touched you, I—"

She reached up on her tiptoes, cupped his cheeks, and pressed her mouth to his. His arms pulled her close, and he breathed in the scents of vanilla and heather. How had this woman become so dear to him in so short a time? But she had, and he couldn't let her go any more than he could stop breathing.

Her lips parted, and his tongue searched for hers, moaning into her mouth as he tasted her sweetness. Her nails skimmed up and down his back, and his body responded. He ached with desire and love and the need to be closer. Scooping her up in his arms, never breaking their kiss, he walked to a chair and sat her on his lap.

Brigid continued the light grazes along his shoulders and arms, her bottom pressing against his throbbing manhood. He trailed his lips along her jaw, then her neck, and tasted the salt on her skin as his tongue traced her collarbone. He pulled the tie of her nightshift and leaned back to see her breasts, stroke the pink tips. She gasped and let her head fall back.

"Ye make me crave something I canna name," she said, her voice husky with passion. "I have a pounding here that I dinna understand nor couldna stop it if I wanted to." She took one of his hands and placed it between her legs, covering her mons.

Her heat made him grit his teeth, wondering how long he could control his own desire. Frank cradled one breast, his lips brushing against hers, his fingers stroking her mound below.

"Sweet Mary," she murmured and her hips pushed into his palm. Her breath came faster, her chest rising and falling as he continued to stroke and fondle.

"You were made for love, Brigid," he whispered again her ear. "May I touch you here?" His finger slid along her folds, parting them, her moisture soaking into the nightshift.

She nodded, her eyes wide and glazed, dark and blue as the evening sky just before night claims it back from the day. He held her gaze, his finger and thumb lightly pinching one pink tip then the other before his other hand slid under her cotton gown.

"Saints and sinners," she moaned as his thumb found and circled her

nub. Her head fell back again. "What are ye doing to me?"

"Loving you, my sweet Brigid." She was wet and pliant and *his*. He dipped a finger inside her slickness, and her lids flew open. "Shhh, I won't hurt you."

Brigid shook her head and closed her eyes again as he continued the circles around her sweet spot. "No, ye'd never hurt me."

Her hips moved in rhythm with his finger. He licked her nipple and took it into his mouth as he slid a second finger inside her. His rod was stiff and aching as he imagined himself sliding into her, moving slowly against her softness, increasing the pace until...

"Frank, oh, Frank," she gasped as her hips bucked up. She clutched his neck, her nails digging into his skin.

His fingers moved in and out, centering on the spot inside her where his thumb circled the tight bead on the outside. Her muscles went rigid, her breathing shallow. He covered her mouth with his, swallowing her moans as she convulsed around his fingers. Her bottom pushed against his manhood, and he thought he might explode along with her. He slowed his rhythm, letting her body ease from the unaccustomed ecstasy, watching her face as she came down from the cloud of passion. Her body trembled with each light caress, her eyes glassy, chest heaving.

Frank cupped her mons and kissed her until the quivering lessened. He marveled at the contentment he felt, the fullness in his chest from giving her pleasure. Pulling her nightshift over her thighs, he pulled her against his chest and kissed the top of her head.

"I love you, Brigid MacNaughton." It came from his heart. Simple, honest, hopeful.

"I thought we couldna put out my fire unless we were married?"

He laughed. A long, loud laugh. This woman filled him with happiness and made his world complete. "This is a temporary remedy. There's so much more to lovemaking, my sweet."

"But we need a piece of paper first." She gave him a lazy smile, her hand moving slowly down his chest. "So, Lord Raines, how do I quench *yer* fire?"

Frank pushed her off his lap with a chuckle. "That's for another time, I hope. For now, I must leave before you become a doxy and I become a rake."

"I dinna think it's fair for me to feel like this..." She sighed. "And ye get nothing in return."

He pulled her into his arms once more and kissed those sweet, plump

lips before retreating to his room. “You’ve given me more than you know.” He opened the door and checked the hall, refusing to let anything dull his mood. Even the fact she had not returned his declaration of love. Perhaps she was overwhelmed, or she hadn’t heard him. She was an innocent, and he would not rush her. Yet the disappointment still hovered like a dark cloud on a sunny day.

Frank was halfway down the hall when he heard a *pssst!* He turned to see two sparkling sapphire orbs in a cloud of mahogany peeking out the door.

“I love ye, too, Lord Raines.” She blew him a kiss. “Propriety be damned.”



The next morning

Barker deftly tied the cravat and brushed several imaginary specks from Frank’s bottle green riding jacket. The man hadn’t said a word about the previous day. By God, he’d just ask. He was fascinated by this complex valet.

“I didn’t realize you carried a pistol, Barker.”

“That is one question you never asked, my lord.” He handed Frank his gloves.

“Where did you learn to shoot? That was a crack shot.”

“Hunting as a youth and the military.” Barker collected the previous day’s clothes and stopped at the door. “Will there be anything else before we meet with the parish constable, my lord?”

“So, you’ve killed men before?” Frank wondered if the giant cur he’d fought had survived the night. He didn’t know how he felt about taking another life, even if it was a bloody highwayman.

“Yes, sir. It’s unfortunate but excusable when necessary.” He cleared his throat. “Yesterday was required, or the ladies would have been harmed.”

“Of course.” His valet had been in the army. What other mysteries were beneath that lackluster veneer? “I wanted to thank you. You were instrumental in defeating those ruffians.”

Barker nodded, moved to the door, then paused with an almost imperceptible gleam in his dark eyes. “I’m happy to instruct you in target practice if you desire, my lord.” And with that, he was gone.

“That man was wasted on my stepfather,” Frank mumbled, his

shoulders quaking with laughter.

The constable took their statements. Both men had been taken into custody, and all three identified. They fit the description, along with the boy, from several other victims in the area.

"We can't find the lad, though. He must have run off," said the constable. He rubbed his balding head and looked at his notes. "You haven't seen him?"

"What will happen to him?" asked Lady Brecken, giving Brigid a sideways glance. "He was so young."

"Penal servitude in Botany Bay, I'd imagine." The man shrugged. "If he were older, he might be hanged. His size and age should save him from that."

"We'll send word if we find him," Frank said, catching the panic in Brigid's blue eyes. "Thank you for coming so quickly this morning. You have all my information. If you need anything else, don't hesitate to send word."

"Yes, my lord. It's a good day when we get these criminals off the roads."

The squire and constable left, and breakfast was served in the private dining room once again. This time the maid and valet did not join them, eating earlier in the kitchen. Frank slurped his coffee, watching Brigid slather butter and honey on her biscuit. She took a bite, honey dripping from her mouth. The pink tip of her tongue darted out to catch a drop of the sugary liquid. His crotch swelled, and he focused on the eggs and toast on his plate. Gretna Green might be a consideration. Hell and damnation, he was a man, not a monk.

"Lord Raines?"

Brigid's voice interrupted his thoughts. His head jerked up. "I beg your pardon. What?"

"Thank ye for not handing over Boy-O."

"I think you're right. He was a victim as well, and I can't justify transporting a five-year-old to Botany Bay."

Lady Brecken smiled. "You're a decent man, Lord Raines. I'm proud to have you as a..." She paused, then finished, "Friend."

Brother. The slip reminded him there were still secrets he held from Brigid. He'd have to remedy that before they married. Would she care about his parentage? Frank doubted it. In Scotland, bastards could inherit titles. Their laws didn't always coincide with English laws. Another thought struck him.

"Miss MacNaughton, the constable mentioned the highwayman had

been shot in the thigh. That's quite an impressive shot for a man, let alone a woman." Embarrassing, really. He'd missed completely, and she'd hit a bull's eye in the man's leg.

"A fluke, Lord Raines. Luck tends to ride on my shoulder." She gave him a sunny smile. "I'm sure yer miss was a fluke as well."

That soothed his pride a bit. "Yes, well..."

"I've an itch to scratch with ye, my lord," Brigid said, her eyes narrowed. "I would appreciate no' being called *churlish* again."

"Or a *poor chit*," added Evie. "Though you did save me from that outburst. It might have been worse had they known my husband was an earl and you were a viscount."

He nodded. "Much better that I was hired help for a nobleman."

"Weel, ye sounded verra convincing. However, I'd like to put on record that I'm no' a hellcat, nor do I complain incessantly."

"Of course not! Um, did you both sleep well?" he asked, changing the subject.

"Aye, like a baby." Brigid winked at him.

Heat drifted up his neck. "Good, good."

His eye caught Lady Brecken, who observed them with a smirk. "What shall we do with our new charge?" she asked, mercifully changing the subject.

"He can't stay here as I'd planned," said Frank. "Someone might recognize him."

"We'll take him with us to the mill," Brigid said around a mouthful of biscuit. "One of our clan will take him in. He can do small jobs and learn his letters and numbers."

"Your clan will simply take in a... a stray?" Frank was shocked. He'd thought to find an orphanage. "There are institutions for such children."

"Where they grow up with no one who cares about them. Fate sent him to us, so we will oblige." Brigid reached over and patted his hand. "Ye'll get used to our ways."

Chapter Twelve

Homecomings and Hope

“Are you sure he’ll be all right on top of the luggage?” asked Evie.

“He’ll be fine. Did ye see him scramble to the top of the pile? He’s got better balance than I do.” Brigid stuck her head out the window and squinted up at the boy. He waved enthusiastically with a broad grin. What a difference a bath and a meal could make in a child’s life. It made her think of Liam, and home, and Scotland.

“Then I’ll worry about you instead.” Evie crossed her arms over her chest. “What happened last night? Should we share a room tonight to keep you safe?”

Brigid snorted. “I’m safe enough. Besides, he’s a gentleman and insists he canna put out the fire inside me until we’re married.”

“The fire inside you?” Evie’s brow furrowed, then her eyes grew wide. “Oh, my! I hate to tell you this, but a gentleman shouldn’t speak of fires and burning desire.”

“I didna say anything about burning desire,” Brigid argued, “but I canna deny it. The mon sets a blaze inside me, then tells me he loves me.”

“He did?” Her friend beamed. “It’s about time. He’s been smitten since you met him in the park. Do you have any plans yet?”

She shrugged. “I’m considering a favorable answer when he asks me to marry him. I havena thought much past that, except how to tell my family.”

“Are you worried they won’t accept him?” asked Evie. “Because he’s English? They welcomed Fenella.”

“She’s a woman. It’s different with the men. He needs to prove himself, and I’m no’ sure how he’ll do it.” She rubbed the velvet pouch in her palm. “The true test will be Lachlan and Colin, my cousin. If they take to Frank and find him suitable, Grandda will be easier to convince.”

“So, this visit is critical.”

“Aye,” Brigid agreed. “I want to see his estate when we return. I’m no’ sure I can leave the Highlands and need to see where my new home will be.”

“Charles says it’s lovely, but too far north for his taste.”

“Does Mr. Wilkens dislike the weather?” Some people didn’t like the colder temperatures in the north. Brigid loved the different seasons, finding benefits to all four.

“No, he says the land is... untidy. He prefers neat and orderly.” Evie laughed. “He’s a typical Englishman.”

That sounded hopeful. Perhaps Frank’s estate was a bit wild, closer to her home than the grounds she’d seen outside London. It put her mind at ease. Evie returned to her book, and she returned to the previous evening. The images flashed through her mind—her tears, the knock, his comforting arms. His lips on hers, his mouth doing things to her breasts she’d never imagined. And then his fingers...

Saints and sinners! His fingers were magical. Her pulse pounded, heat flushing through her core with just the memory. The flames had licked her from the inside out, her tense muscles quivering then turning to jelly. That bewildering ache in her lower parts had pulsed and throbbed until the torture turned to pleasure and swept through her like a spring flood, leaving her wet and limp.

“A penny for your thoughts.”

She jerked at Frank’s deep timbre. Did he know? Was he teasing her?

“A lady doesna kiss and tell,” she said smugly through the open window. His leg was so close, she could reach out caress his thigh. *Sweet Mary, ye’ve become a wanton*, she scolded herself.

“Nor does a gentleman,” he agreed.

Evie cleared her throat. “May I remind you both that I *am* supposed to be a chaperone?”

“I will take my cue and leave you ladies until our next stop,” he said with a bow from the saddle. “One more night and we’ll be safely in Glasgow.”



The Lowland town had grown since she was a child. New streets had been added, accommodating thriving businesses. Brigid frowned at the crowded thoroughfares and alleys. The blue and white uniforms of the Hussars mingled with the citizens; the gold flash of their hats glinted in the late afternoon sun. Why was the cavalry here?

Tension filled the air. It sent a shiver through her.

As they made their way to the residential area, they came upon new housing under construction. Investments were prime, and it seemed

business-minded men were getting in on the boom. The once small town of Glasgow would soon challenge Edinburgh in commerce and population.

Her aunt's three-story townhouse of red brick overlooked a fashionable west-end neighborhood. A butler and housemaid opened the front door, and two grooms appeared on the steps. Frank dismounted and escorted the ladies from the carriage. Brigid blinked back tears. *Ye blethering eejit!* she scolded herself. It had only been two months, yet it had felt like a lifetime.

She picked up her skirts and took the steps two at a time, tossing a smile at the servants. "Gideon! Aunt Maeve! We're here!" She stopped in the entrance hall. To her left was a parlor, to her right a small receiving room, and past that the stairs. At the landing stood her aunt.

"Oh, my dear Brigid," exclaimed Aunt Maeve. She descended and held out her arms. "Ye look lovely."

Brigid wrapped her arms around the woman who sounded so much like her own mother. Her hair was darker, but the facial features and voice were so similar she swallowed a lump in her throat. "I'm afraid I've abandoned my friends."

"Let's go meet them." Aunt Maeve wore her dark hair up in a severe chignon, but her indigo eyes danced with laughter. "Still impetuous?"

Brigid grabbed her hand and led her outside. "This is Lady Brecken and Lord Raines. They generously offered to escort me."

"Lord Raines," she said with a nod of her head. "Thank ye for taking such good care of my niece."

"It's been my pleasure, ma'am."

Brigid grinned at him, sure that her aunt must see what a wonderful and handsome man he was. "And this is Lady Brecken."

"Fenella's sister! I'm so happy to make yer acquaintance." Her aunt held out her hands and took Evie's. "I assume ye'll be staying with yer sister?"

"I thought I'd stay with my grandmother. My sister and I spent so many summers there." She put a hand over eyes and squinted at an upper-story window. "Someone is waving at us."

The sash opened and a brown-haired beauty leaned out. "Sister, get up here this verra minute or I'll come to ye."

Brigid laughed. "I'll be right there." She turned to Evie and Frank. "That's Lissie, my brother's widow. Dinna forget to call on me in the morning as ye promised."

The viscount bowed. "Yes, Your Majesty. We will pick you up

tomorrow afternoon for a tour of the mill.”

“Do ye have a place to stay, Lord Raines?” asked Aunt Maeve. “We’ve a room here if ye’d prefer.”

“I couldn’t put upon you, ma’am,” he said. “I’ve been told the Buck’s Head has appropriate lodging.”

“Oh, that won’t do at all. Political tensions are high in this town and the national strike was recently put down. The hotel is occupied with city magistrates and soldiers waiting for the pot to boil over again. Gideon said the horses are kept saddled in the courtyard behind the building, ready to put down any more insurgent radicals.” She tapped her mouth with a forefinger. “If you prefer a hotel, I would try the Black Bull Inn.”

“Ah, that’s where we’re to drop off the post-chaise.” He tipped his hat. “Thank you, my lady. If there’s nothing available, then I will indeed press upon your hospitality.”

Brigid was thrumming with excitement and barely heard their conversation. She gave Evie another hug as footmen took down her luggage and stopped herself before giving the same to Frank.

“Come along, Boy-O. Ye’ll be staying with me for now.” She turned to her aunt. “We, er, stumbled across the lad on our way. I’ll bring him to the mill tomorrow. He’s a hard worker and needs a home.”

“Aye, right.” Her aunt nodded at the butler. “Could ye find a place for...” She looked back at Brigid.

“Boy-O,” confirmed Brigid. “I’ll explain it all over a cup of tea.”



Frank dropped off Evie next. Her grandmother’s house was a two-story red brick in the lovely neighborhood of Grahamston. They passed shops, gardens, and even a theater on their way.

“My grandparents owned a bookshop near here. It’s not Mayfair, but it’s a mix of honest, upstanding merchants and tradesmen.” Lady Brecken peered at the house and gave a sigh. “This is my second home. I have so many memories here.”

A plump woman with spectacles came rushing down the front walk. “My Evie, my sweet girl, let me look at ye.” She hugged Lady Brecken, pushed her back an arm’s length, and let her eyes drift from head to toe, then hugged her again.

“Lord Raines, this is my grandmother, Mrs. Douglas.”

The older woman smiled, showing a dimple in each cheek. Frank

thought she must have been a prime article in her day. He took her hand and bowed over it.

"Will ye join us for dinner, my lord?" she asked, her dark brown eyes curious. "I've heard so much about ye."

"I hope it's all good," he murmured with a meaningful glance at Lady Brecken.

"Verra," Mrs. Douglas agreed with a nod of her head, her tight gray curls bobbing at her cheeks.

"I need to get settled myself. I hope you will offer again."

Another older man came from the back of the house. He wore a sullen expression and a woolen cap over faded reddish-gray hair. With a grunt of greeting at the postillions, he turned up the corners of his mouth at Lady Brecken. Frank wondered if this was his version of a smile.

"Evenin', Miss Evie," he said and doffed his cap before jamming it back on his head. "Tell me which ones are coming down."

"Mr. MacGregor! It's so good to see you." Lady Brecken rushed to the man and gave him a hug and kiss on the cheek.

MacGregor dropped his head, hiding a face that had turned the same color as his hair. "We've missed ye too."

While she and the maid directed which bags stayed, Mrs. Douglas resumed the conversation. "Today is Friday. We always have Sunday dinner here. The more the merrier, I always say. Ye'll have to come, so I can thank ye properly."

"My grandmother has a cook but likes to do much of it herself. Wait until you taste her shortbread. Gah! My mouth is watering at the thought." Evie pulled her maid forward. "Grandmama, you remember Louella, don't you?"

"Of course. Yer rooms are ready. Rose will be back soon, and ye can have a catch-up." Rose had been Fenella's maid and had come with her to Glasgow. She'd liked the town and Mrs. Douglas so much that she'd stayed after Fenella married.

Evie turned to Frank. "We'll meet you promptly at three tomorrow. Whoever you don't meet then, you'll see on Sunday."

Frank bid them farewell and followed the post-chaise to The Black Bull Inn. The streets were still crowded, but it wasn't the usual London type of scurrying about. He liked to keep abreast of the current politics and had read about the widespread strike. Factory workers and skilled artisans had petitioned time and again for Parliamentary reform. Wages had been halved during the war and increases had been non-existent

afterwards. What little relief had been provided by England's government was hoarded by the factory owners. Between a growing population, miserable wages, and cholera outbreaks, the working man's plight was dismal.

Remnants of rebellion lingered as he trotted along the cobblestone streets. Ripped, stained, or burned posters hung in tatters on street corners and poles.

STRIKE IN SCOTLAND APRIL 3

or

BE HEARD ON APRIL 3

Hundreds had gathered, armed and passionate, and stood for their cause. While he sympathized with their plight, he knew that raising arms against a government was never a way to victory. The English called it treason, and the consequence would be hanging. Names had been mentioned in the articles, and trials would be held over the summer.

Frank shivered. Entitled noblemen who hated change versus the common folk who only wanted a decent life. It wasn't fair. Then again, he'd learned long ago that most things rarely were. He was thankful they hadn't arrived a week earlier.

The yellow post-chaise turned onto Argyll Street. They stopped in front of a large four-story stone building. Nine windows ran across the second and third floors, while the attics had only half the windows. A large sign with a black bull heralded the entrance. Several carriages were parked in front with more around the side of the building. The inn was a bustling stage-coach post, and he preferred the travelers and drivers to the soldiers and magistrates at the other hotel.

Barker directed the baggage, while Frank procured the rooms. Once they were settled in their lodgings, the valet produced a decanter of brandy.

"You are a magician, Barker," he said, his mouth watering at the sight of the amber liquid.

"No, sir. You will be charged for it." He busied himself with unpacking the viscount's luggage. "Dinner will arrive shortly. I hope roasted fowl will be to your liking."

"If it's hot and edible, it's to my liking." Frank sighed and sank into a leather wingback chair. He swirled the tawny liquor in the glass and took a sip.

It had been quite a learning experience today. Homecomings had

always been quiet affairs, the less ripple in the water the better. But his companions were far from discreet. He thought of Brigid's squeal and the lady waving halfway out the window. When he'd delivered Lady Brecken, it had been the same. Joy, excitement, hugs, and kisses. The most extraordinary reunions he'd ever witnessed. The obvious affection was overwhelming. Ridiculously demonstrative. And his soul longed for such a homecoming of his own.

Chapter Thirteen

Qualms, Questions, and Quips

Mid-April

First night in Glasgow

“Ye want me to *be nice* to him?” Lachlan stared at her as if she had two heads.

“Did I stumble on my words?” Brigid stood with her hands on her hips. “Dinna scare him off with yer manly act.”

Her brother scratched his head, pushing the red-brown curls into more disarray. “Ye’ve met a man. Ye want us to meet him. *And be nice.*”

“Aye.” She stuck out her chin.

A slow grin appeared on his face. He turned to Colin. “Did ye hear this?”

“Aye,” said Colin, drawing his bushy black brows together. “When have we ever treated a mon unfairly?”

“Cousin, just meeting ye could scare the bravest soul.” Brigid worried Frank would look at Colin and remember Twisted Nose, the highwayman. Not that Colin had a flat face. He was handsome enough, with dark hair and blue eyes like her grandda. But he was so big. He towered over all the MacNaughtons, and combined with massive arms and a broad chest, he was considered the MacNaughton *tour de force*. “If ye remember to smile, ye willna be so intimidating.”

“Do I have to smile?” asked Lachlan, obviously unhappy at this added demand.

“I’ll settle with no’ scowling at him like ye are now.”

“Ye’re not nearly so handsome when you scowl, husband,” added his wife Fenella.

The trio had arrived unexpectedly, declaring they wouldn’t wait a day to see their beloved Brigid. After a series of bear hugs and being swung in circles until she was dizzy, they had eaten a hearty meal of collops and tatties. Lissie had retired early, still easily fatigued, and Gideon had accompanied her. With a smaller audience, Brigid had worked up the nerve to bring up Frank. She’d had a nightmare about her

family trying to turn him into a Scot. First, they dressed him in a plaid, dragged him to a bonfire, and taught him how to spit roast a pig. Then they'd pumped the viscount with whisky, fed him haggis, and laughed when he cast his accounts. The poor man had run as fast as he could back to England.

"I mean it, Lachlan, stop," admonished Fenella. "I've met Lord Raines. He's a gentleman and very kind."

Lachlan leveled his gaze on his wife. "How well do ye ken this man?"

Brigid rolled her eyes, and Fenella grinned. "Such a suspicious mind. He's a close friend of my cousin, Charles. We went skating once, and I was afraid of making a fool of myself. He escorted me, kept me on my feet, and never once made me feel embarrassed."

Lachlan pulled his wife to his side and brushed back her pale blonde hair. She had gray eyes like Frank, and Brigid thought they could have been siblings. "If he treated ye well, then I'm bound to do the same."

Brigid let out a sigh of relief. "Ye've eased my mind."

Colin crossed the room and refilled his glass with whisky. "Lachy?" he asked, holding the decanter.

Lachlan nodded. "I think we should save some for tomorrow. Good scotch always cheers me, and my sister wants us happy tomorrow."

"We should warn ye that the mill is still under construction." Colin eased into a chair in front of the fireplace next to Aunt Maeve. "Thank ye for a fine meal, Maeve. Have ye met this god of a mon that has our Brigid in such a fret?"

"I have." She smiled encouragingly at Brigid. "I met him only briefly, but I liked him."

"I hate to end this evening, but Lachlan must bring me to see my sister. And don't"—she pointed a finger at her husband—"whine about spending a night without me."

Lachlan opened his mouth.

"Or I'll stay there the entire time Evie is here."

He closed his mouth.

Brigid snorted. Her domineering, rowdy brother had given into a woman. *Saints and sinners!* He'd found his perfect match in Fenella.

As the group prepared to leave, Brigid hugged Lachlan again. "I've missed ye, Brother."

"Aye, right," he said with a grunt and a smile. "Ye just want me to behave myself."



Frank had taken a hackney earlier in the afternoon and now stood outside the MacNaughton Textile Company. He was to meet the ladies for a tour of the mill and the city. The weather was chilly and gray, and he squinted up at the stone monstrosity that matched the day. A dreary building of smooth sandstone and lime tinged with smoke and age; it resembled a prison more than a factory. For some, he supposed, they could be one in the same. Large, opaque windows lined each of the three stories, allowing light to enter but discouraging any outside eyes. A loud humming floated from the huge double-doors.

The noise from inside competed with the traffic behind him. The street was busy with carriages, carts, and horses. Drivers called to a friend or cursed a conveyance that cut them off. Peddlers shouted out their wares. Pedestrians passed him by, some with a smile, nod, or tip of a hat; others with their head down and an urgency to their step. A carriage stopped in front of the textile company. Frank recognized the dour driver MacGregor that he'd met the previous day. The older man had helped unload luggage when he'd delivered Lady Brecken to her grandmother's home. That same lady, her sister, and Brigid were both being escorted from the vehicle.

"Lord Raines," called Mrs. MacNaughton. "It is lovely to see you again."

Frank startled a moment, taking in this tall, willowy blonde. The first time he'd met her, when she was still a Franklin, he hadn't known of his real parentage. She was a female version of himself. Did no one else notice the resemblance? Had Lady Brecken shared his secret with her sister?

He bowed to the ladies, and Brigid took his arm. "Did ye sleep well? Is yer hotel to yer liking?"

Frank smiled at her concern. Or was it a selfish hope that he'd have to move in with her Aunt Maeve? This Scottish beauty had no idea of societal rules. Regardless, her presence calmed his nerves. This was the introduction he'd been dreading. "It's suitable. Comfortable bed, edible food, and Barker has seen to my every need."

"Grandmama sent a tin of shortbread," announced Lady Brecken. "It's singlehandedly responsible for Fenella's marriage to Lachlan."

"Shortbread?" Had he heard her right?

"Yes, but it's a long story," answered Lady Brecken. "I promise to tell you later."

"I'd wager there'll be much to talk about," added Mrs. MacNaughton, studying him with a keen eye.

She knows, he thought, not sure if he should be dismayed or relieved.

"I dinna ken what to expect after the fire. Fenella and Lachlan said the main damage was in the store rooms." Brigid propelled him up the steps. He pulled on the heavy oak doors, and the noise assaulted them.

Inside it was a hectic production. Rows of power looms filled the huge ground floor with mostly men manning the machines. Older children scurried in the aisles, carrying buckets or baskets of bobbins. Frank had only seen weaving done by hand as a child. Now, he marveled at the speed of the looms. The compact steel frames glinted in the sunlight pouring in from the large dusty windows, their deafening mechanical *clickety-clack* drowning out any conversation by the employees.

"Welcome to MacNaughton Textile," boomed a voice over the machinery. Even from a distance, Frank gauged the man to the biggest he'd ever met. He considered himself tall and had rarely come across a man that surpassed him. The Scot wore a kilt of the same pattern Brigid always wore, with white socks and a linen shirt. His thick arms and broad chest left little room inside the material. Bloody hell, was this her brother? Silver threaded the man's sideburns, and the same blue eyes peered down at him.

"This is Colin, my cousin," yelled Brigid over the din. "This is Lord Raines."

The man smiled down at him, and Frank had the impression it was forced. They were prepared to dislike him, then. Because he was English or because they were protective over the youngest MacNaughton?

Blast! It might be both. Frank straightened to his full height and held out his hand. Colin took it in a firm shake, but not the squeeze Frank had expected. That was a step in the right direction, he supposed.

Mrs. MacNaughton bid them farewell, and Colin led the group down the aisles. After describing how the looms worked, Colin held out his arms and shoed them down the aisle. Frank noted the still-strong odor of smoke. "This side of the factory is the wool shed, with two other sections for cotton and flax."

Frank noticed several very young boys fetching items for the adults or standing by the shuttles, ready to replace the wefts with more thread. "They can't be more than six or seven years old," he said in Brigid's ear as they entered a hallway. "Is this where Boy-O will work?"

Colin shut a thick oak door, muffling the clamor of the workroom. Brigid began her reply in a yell, then adjusted her voice. "Families need the income, my lord. Contrary to other factories, we make sure they're

in positions that willna cause them harm. There are enough accidents in the workplace without adding a child's death to anyone's conscience."

They proceeded up a flight of stairs and into another large room. Here, rows of handlooms filled the space, and all the workers were women. "They used to do the weaving at home, but it's cheaper to have them here," explained Colin. "We get a solid day's work and higher productivity, and they receive a steadier income."

The back of the warehouse was once again filled with bolts of cloth and sacks of wool and flax. A background of charred walls and replaced beams were evidence of the recent fire, along with a powerful odor of burned flax and wool. "How much did we lose?" asked Brigid.

"No' that there's a silver lining to any of this, but we were in between shipments. We'd just sent out our finished goods, and most of the raw materials were due the following day." Colin's face hardened as he looked out toward the activity on the dock. A barge was being unloaded, and men lumbered past them with canvas sacks on their shoulders. "Thank God, the looms were unharmed. That would have put us under."

Another revelation. The MacNaughton men discussed business—finances—with the women. Frank realized meeting the men might shed more light on the woman he was determined to marry. He sensed there were things she wasn't telling him, yet was hesitant to push her.

He had secrets of his own.

Brigid pulled him away from the conversation and over to a dusty window. She wiped at it with the side of her fist, and they both peered out. Below to their left, a second ship bobbed in the choppy waves of the Clyde. Workers loaded crates and bags onto carts and wheeled them off the dock. To her right, he could see part of the giant water wheel, churning the river to produce the energy needed for production. It was fascinating to see the entire process.

They ended the tour in the office. Frank expected to find Lachlan there, but instead Mrs. MacNaughton sat working the ledgers. The large room held a chipped walnut desk and several mismatched chairs. One wall held shelves lined with books on textiles, weaving, and dyes. There were texts filled with illustrations of different types of machinery and others with various cloth samples.

"I'm afraid my husband had to meet a client, Lord Raines," she announced, pinning him with his own clear, gray eyes. "He and Colin will meet you at the Black Bull for a pint at seven tonight."

"We will?" grunted Colin.

"You will," repeated Mrs. MacNaughton. "And we will all gather at Mrs. Douglas's for dinner on Sunday." She looked at Frank. "That's my grandmother."

"Who makes the best shortbread," verified Frank.

"I'd almost marry the woman to have a piece of that every day," said Colin with a sigh. "But I believe MacGregor would have my ballocks for breakfast if I did."

"He's verra protective of her," agreed Brigid.

The knot in Frank's stomach tightened. Alone with this behemoth and Brigid's brother. To interrogate him or scare him off? It didn't matter. He'd get through it because the prize was worth anything they'd put him through.



That evening

The Black Bull Inn

Frank sat at the wooden table, his back in the corner, facing the door. Wheels crunched along the street, a donkey brayed, pots clanged, and glasses clinked as the bartender served the crowd. So many conversations were going on at once that one could have a private conversation, despite the number of patrons. He'd come down early and ordered three bumpers. Now he sat, his chest tight, mouth grim, and fists clenched. Ready for the attack he was sure to come.

Barker had chosen a conservative waistcoat and minor cravat for the evening. *Afraid they'll take me for an English dandy*, he thought with a frown.

The big, dark Scot lumbered through the door first. The second man, wearing the same pattern kilt as the first, was undeniably Brigid's brother. Same color hair, nose, high cheek bones. And those brilliant blue eyes. Would their own children inherit the MacNaughton coloring? A vision of a wispy blonde-haired, blue-eyed child swept past him.

Don't let the cart pass the horse.

"There he is," mumbled Colin, pointing a shoulder at Frank's table. "This is Lord Raines." He nodded at the shorter Scot. "This is Lachlan MacNaughton."

Frank stood and held out his hand. They shook, nodded, and all three sat down.

"I took the liberty of ordering some ale." He held up his bumper. "It's

a pleasure to meet you.”

“We’ll see,” Lachlan said cheerfully. “It might be a long night, though. Hope ye’re up to it, Sassenach.”

His jaw clenched. He’d only play the victim for so long. His temper was known to snap on occasion too. “Did you care for a meal?”

Colin shook his head. “And ruin the fine scotch whisky we plan to drink?”

Both Scots took a long pull of their ale. Colin waved to the barmaid, who seemed to know him from her wide smile. “The best whisky ye’ve got, my bonny lass!”

She made her way through the tables and groups of men with a dramatic sashay. With a *thunk*, the bottle hit the table while her chest pushed dangerously close to Colin’s chin. His eyes lowered to the cleavage then up to the bar maid. He winked. “Keep an eye on us, lass. We’re thirsty tonight.”

“Happy to,” she said saucily and flounced away.

Lachlan reached over and grabbed the bottle. Pulling the cork, he sniffed the contents and sighed. He tipped it back for a long swallow, wiped his mouth, and passed it to Colin. His cousin did the same. Colin handed the bottle to Frank, who shook his head. The disapproval in the MacNaughtons’ eyes was evident.

“Weel, let’s get straight to the point,” said Lachlan. “Ye love my sister?”

He was taken aback by the abruptness. So, this was how it would be. Frank reached for the bottle and took a drink. It was harsher than the brandy he preferred, but it would do the trick. “I want to marry her.”

“Her da is dead. So ye must pass muster with us. Then the chief, her grandda, willna be a problem,” said Colin. “We, on the other hand, are always a problem.”

Lachlan guffawed and grabbed the bottle. “Why?” he asked Frank.

“Why?” That stumped him.

“Why do ye want to wed her?” Lachlan handed him the bottle.

Frank tipped it back and concentrated on his burning throat. He’d expected an interrogation of his family, estate, financial situation. But not *why*. “I-I enjoy her company.”

“I enjoy my hound’s company, but I didna marry her.” Lachlan sat back and crossed his arms over his broad chest. The linen shirt was snug around his upper arms, his knuckles scraped and red. A man not afraid of giving or receiving a good pummeling.

“She’s clever, and beautiful, and brave.” Those were all good

qualities, he thought. Better than, *She stirs my blood, drives me mad when she's not around, and drives me mad when she's close. I'd take her to Gretna Green tonight if I could and plant a babe in her belly before morning.*

No, that wouldn't do at all. He reached for the bottle of scotch whisky.

"We know all that. Why will she make ye a good wife?" asked Colin, mimicking Lachlan's stance.

"She's educated and will run my household," he said with a smile. That was an excellent point.

"She told ye that?" Lachlan smirked. "Ye realize she canna cook? At least, ye canna eat it."

Frank chuckled. "Tarts are her specialty, she said. Regardless, I have a cook. She only needs to give the orders."

"She's good at that," agreed Colin. "Ye dinna mind her sharp tongue?"

"I beg your pardon," Frank objected, feeling his feathers ruffle. "Brigid is gracious, and generous, and a kind."

Silence.

Extremely loud laughter.

"What's so amusing? She's graceful on the dance floor, listens well, and I consider her to be an ideal, gently bred woman." A slow anger kindled. Family or not, these men would not insult Brigid.

Colin wiped his eyes. "She's never overseen a household nor did she care to learn. Her grandmother and mother let her run the hills and glens as a child. She was our constant shadow. The lass would make a better husband than wife."

Frank stood up so abruptly, his chair tipped backward. "I won't stand for Miss MacNaughton to be insulted. I demand you take that back."

Colin rose slowly and peered down his nose at Frank. "What if I dinna?"

"I'll demand satisfaction," he said without hesitation. His gaze never faltered, and the rage inside him added to his determination. "No one speaks ill of the woman I plan to marry. And I will. Marry. Brigid. MacNaughton." His finger jabbed into Colin's chest with the last four words.

"Ye're willing to take this outside and decide it with this?" jeered the Scot, holding up his massive fist.

"If need be, I will." His jaw ticked; his fingers curled into tight fists at his side. From the corner of his eye, he saw a man at the next table stand and adjust his cap. Friend of the MacNaughtons? So much for

honor. “Whether I win or get beaten to a pulp, it doesn’t matter. I will defend her to my last breath.”

Chapter Fourteen

Midnight Greetings and Gretna Green

“Let’s no’ make her widow before we make her a bride, eh, Cousin?” Lachlan leaned forward and placed a hand on each arm.

Colin’s face split into a wide grin. “Ye got bottom, I’ll give ye that,” he said to Frank, then sat down and took another swallow of whisky. “Ye’ll need that kind of endurance if ye’re to marry our Brigid.” He handed the bottle to Frank.

“Now, back to the real reason ye think my sister will make a good wife.” Lachlan raised a brow. “The truth and nothing less.”

Frank realized neither man cared about the duties Brigid would perform. It was about affection. “I went to London searching for a wife. I was lonely and wanted a family. When I’m with Brigid, I feel as if I’ve found that. As if she’s what’s been missing in my life.”

He looked at both men, unreadable expressions on their faces. He felt like a green-boy, divulging his feelings with these strangers.

“Anything else?” asked Colin.

“I love her. I will protect her, cherish her, and make her happy to the best of my ability.”

“There it is!” Lachlan slammed his fist on the table. “All the other humdudgeon means nothing. Ye gotta love the lass, or she’ll be the death of ye.”

Colin nodded. “Aye, without the love, ye willna have the patience. And with our dear Brigid, ye’ll need all the patience ye can get.”

“Now that we’ve established what ye’re made of and yer intentions, we can talk details.” Lachlan nodded at the liquor. “Sit, mon, and drink. As I said, we’ve got a long night ahead of us. I’ve nothing to go home to tonight, thanks to ye.”

“Me?” he asked, mollified that it had been a test and pleased he’d stood up to the Scottish behemoth. Taking a drink of his ale, he glanced at the man he’d seen from the corner of his eye and almost spit. There sat Barker in a wool cap and jacket, pint in hand. To the devil, if the valet didn’t have his back! He grinned to himself. The odds had been even all along.

"Ye brought my wife's sister to Glasgow, and now she's abandoned me for Evie." Lachlan waved his cup in the air. "Another round, if ye please."

"Now, let's get to business," said Colin, rubbing his hands together. "Tell us what ye've learned about our little Brigid, and we'll tell ye what ye got wrong."

By the time the bottle was gone, Frank had an elbow on the table and his chin in his hand. "So, tree climbing is at the bottom of her list of skills."

"Afraid so," sympathized Lachlan. "But ye'll never go hungry. That woman is a crack shot and can hit a squirrel at a hundred paces. Oh, and she can doctor anything with four legs or feathers."

"Her real talent is the bow." Colin passed the new bottle. "Have ye seen her ride yet?"

Frank cocked one brow. "Tell me it's sidesaddle."

The men bellowed with laughter.

Lachlan caught his breath first. "She prefers bareback, but she's no' allowed to enter the annual race. Her weight gives her an advantage over the men. They put their foot down."

"Fencing?"

Colin shook his head. "She never liked it."

"Boxing?"

"Ma drew the line there. Said we couldna hurt her face for she'd need to find a husband someday." Lachlan snorted. "And here ye are!"

It took a moment for that statement to wheedle its way through Frank's fog. *Here ye are*. A stupid grin covered his face. "So, I have your approval?"

Colin leaned forward, his face grave. "In truth, no one else wants her. We just wanted to be sure ye wouldna bring her back."

All three men laughed. And laughed. And laughed. Frank hiccupped. "Do I have to meet Calum MacNaughton before we're betrothed?" Bollocks. It'd be another month before he could bed her. If it was only him, he could manage. But he had a sneaking suspicion Brigid wouldn't wait that long.

"My sister's never been one for patience, so I doubt she'll want to wait. That's why she brought ye here." Lachlan sniggered. "Be prepared for a second ceremony at the kirk in Dunderave when ye do meet the rest of the MacNaughtons. The whole clan will want to see the mon who turned my sister into a *gentle lady*."

"To new friends and family." Colin held up his pint.

“Aye.”

“Cheers.” Frank’s head was spinning just a little. Tiny. Bit. He wasn’t sure if it was the new revelations about his future wife or the liquor or both.

Colin wiped his mouth with his sleeve. “There’s one more thing we need to discuss.” He glanced at Lachlan, who nodded. “Ye must tell her who ye really are before ye’re betrothed.”

The air left his lungs. How did they know? Lady Brecken had told her sister... who told her husband. *Confound it.*

“Frank, we dinna judge a mon’s beginnings. There’s nothing to be ashamed about when it comes to yer parentage. Ye had no part in it.” Lachlan leaned forward, his blue eyes intense. “Accept who ye are, and ye’ll be a stronger mon for it.”

“And just think, it makes him yer brother-in-law twice over,” added Colin.

“I ken ye’re no’ on speaking terms with Sir Horace, but trust me that he’ll come round,” said Lachlan. “He’s a mon with integrity and honor. He’ll do right by ye.”

Frank had his doubts. Lady Brecken had said almost the same. “I would welcome a relationship with him. I’ve grown close to Lady Brecken and immediately liked your wife.”

“Ye’re like bloody twins,” Lachlan grumbled. “How could no one figure it out? Are the English all so dense?”

Frank laughed. “I suppose we only see what we’re looking for.”

Colin held up a hand. The humor had left his face, and he nodded to a table near the door. “Does that bafflehead seem familiar?” he asked his cousin.

“Aye, and he has a scar on his forehead.” Lachlan rubbed his own. “I do believe we’ve met.”

“Shall we ask him to join us?” Frank would welcome any friend of his drinking chums. “I’ll buy the next bottle.”

Colin shook his head. “He’s a paid rabble rouser. Goes from factory to factory trying to get the workers riled up. He was on our dock a few months back, and we gave him and his cronies a good skelping.”

“A perfect Glasgow Kiss,” Lachlan agreed with a laugh.

“A Glasgow Kiss?” Frank had a feeling it wasn’t soft or romantic. And how the hell did they drink so much and sound so sober?

“An old-fashioned headbutt. Och, he’s spotted us.” Colin smacked his fist in his palm and cracked his knuckles.

Lachlan put both hands on his head and turned it to one side, then

the other, making little popping noises. Good God, they were ready for a fight. Frank looked to the side and found Barker gone. *Damnation.*

"Where'd ye get that mark on yer head, mon?" Lachlan yelled across the room. The voices died down. "It's a wee scar. Can I make it bigger, so it's easier to see?"

The man stood up, the freckles standing out on his pale face. "If ye're mon enough to try it." Half a dozen men rose with him.

Double hell and damnation.

Frank stood and shook out his arms, issuing a silent thanks to the blacksmith who'd trained him. He grinned. He hadn't been in a real brawl since university. The attempted robbery had been life or death. This would be a veritable release of tension. He rubbed his knuckles, still raw from that day. "Two to one. Not bad odds," he said to the MacNaughtons.

Lachlan grunted. "Colin counts for two."

"Take it outside, or I'll call the constable. Ye can sleep it off in jail or in the alley. Yer choice," called the beefy barkeep. "I'll no' have ye breaking up my establishment."

To Frank's surprise, the men headed to the door. *How civilized!* he thought. He stepped outside and a fist caught him on the side of his jaw. He stumbled, righted himself, and caught his opponent under the chin with his left. So much for polite. The man tottered; Frank planted a facer, and the man fell backwards. He turned to see another catch Colin in the gut. With a grunt, the huge Scot picked the man up by his collar and smashed his fist into his nose. Blood spurted out as the man's head drooped. Colin dropped him with a *thump*.

Frank's head snapped from another blow, this time to his eye, and returned the hit with a solid punch to the cur's ribs. When he doubled over, Frank caught him in the jaw and sent him flying on his arse. Colin and Lachlan were both finishing off their second man when reinforcements appeared from the alley. A pair circled Colin, and two grabbed Lachlan by the arms.

The redhead with the scar stepped from behind and grinned. "Whose turn to get marked now?" He pulled a knife from his boot.

Frank lunged forward, grabbing the man's wrist and snapping it backwards. Bone snapped, and the dirk fell to the ground. The man cried out, grabbing his dangling wrist with his good hand. "Ye'll pay for this, ye fouldsome wretches."

Lachlan wrenched free, giving Frank another man to take down. Colin stepped in, and that was that. Frank bent over, his hands on his

knees as he caught his breath. His knuckles were raw, his jaw hurt, one eye was swelling, and he'd never felt so alive.



Brigid rolled over and pulled the blanket over her head. She was dreaming about her family, drunk and singing Rabby Burns' "Get Up and Bar the Door."

*There lived a mon in yonder glen,
And John Blunt was his name, O
He makes good malt and he brews good ale,
And bears a wondrous fame. O*

Brigid sat up and blinked. It wasn't a dream. *Saints and sinners!* What were those men up to?

*The wind blew in the hallan that night,
Full snell out oer the moor.
Says auld John Blunt to Janet the wife,
"Rise up, rise up, auld Luckie," he says,
"RISE UP AND BAR THE DOOR."*

She gasped. That last line had been Frank's voice, more of a shout and very English. She threw back the counterpane and shrugged into her robe. Below her window stood—well, swaying, mostly—her brother, her cousin, and her love, all roaring drunk. Looking at Frank, her anger melted away. He was so different from her and the other two men. Yet, there they were, with their arms across each other's shoulders, serenading her... in kilts. All *three* of them.

*They made a pact between them,
They made it firm and sure.
Whoe'er should speak the foremost word,
RISE UP AND BAR THE DOOR.*

Brigid giggled as she threw up the sash. It must be the only line the poor man knew. The whole house would be roused soon. A smaller figure stepped from behind the men, leaning his slight weight against the trio as they swayed dangerously far to the left. "Boy-O?" He nodded and waved as the men continued their ballad with gusto.

*Three travelers that had tint their gate,
As through the hills they foor, O,
They airted by the line o light,*

Full straight to John Blunt's door.

"Shhhh," she warned.

She was rewarded with a very loud and sloppy *shhhhh*'s back at her. Brigid couldn't blame them. It was a braw, humorous ballad, and they wouldn't stop until it was finished. They leaned to the right. Boy-O ran to the other side and leaned his back against the leaning tower of men.

They hurled auld Luckie out o her bed

And laid her on the floor,

But never a word auld Luckie would say,

For barring of the door.

"Ye've eaten my bread, ye've drunk my ale,

And ye'll make my auld wife a whore!"

"Aha Johnnie Blunt! Ye have spoke the first word,"

Lachlan jabbed Frank with his elbow.

"RISE UP AND BAR THE DOOR!" shouted Frank.

Laughter bubbled up her throat and spilled out. She saw a light in the hall and knew her aunt was awake. "It's all right, Aunt Maeve. It's just our sodden family."

"I'm bringing them in before they wake all of Glasgow."

"I'll order coffee and tea." Brigid tied her robe and grabbed her brush.

Downstairs, the men stood sheepishly in the parlor. Colin sported a goose egg on his forehead, Lachlan's lip and cheek were swollen, and Frank's eye was puffed and turning a lovely shade of purple. Boy-O sat on a chaise longue with a cap in his hand and smile on his clean face.

"How did ye come to be with these hooligans?" asked Brigid. She walked over to the lad and ruffled his hair.

"Master MacNaughton decided I'd stay wi' him since he's got nobody."

"I said I lived alone, no' that I had nobody," bellowed Colin.

To Brigid's relief, Boy-O grinned and shrugged. Apparently, the giant Scot didn't intimidate him. "They changed their clothes, and I helped His Lordship put on the kilt. They were all so wobbly, I thought it best if I came along."

"To keep them from toppling over?" she asked.

"Aye, miss. I like my new friends, so I don't want nothin' to happen to 'em."

"What?" asked Aunt Maeve, adjusting her mob cap and turning to

the adult men. "Now that ye're inside, ye've lost yer voices?"

"Did ye have to fight with him?" asked Brigid, pushing at Lachlan's chest. "I asked ye to be nice."

"They wwere." Frank defended them with an emphatic nod. "It was a rabble rouser and his gang."

"Frank has something to say to Brigid," blurted Lachlan.

"And then he has something to ask her," added Colin.

Frank tottered and grinned, then belched. His one gray eye widened. "Beg yyyour pardon, ladies."

"Here, ye blethering oafs," said their aunt. She held a tray of biscuits, cold beef, and cheese that a sleepy maid had delivered. "Eat and get some hot coffee in ye. Then we'll give Brigid and Lord Raines some privacy."



The fire crackled and popped in the library hearth. Frank seemed in much better condition than an hour ago. His stare was making her uncomfortable. What had they told him? What was he thinking? "Weel, out with it."

"Perhaps we should wait until morning," Frank hedged, crossing his legs before hurriedly covering his knees with the wool material.

"It is morning."

He turned to the window, the sky beyond turning pink and orange. "It is indeed."

"How did ye come to wear a kilt?" It must have been Lachlan's since it was a wee short on him.

"I'm not quite sure. It happened when we were moving my belongings to your family's townhouse. Colin said he was there alone, and they were paying the cook to feed one man."

"Verra practical of him."

"He's also taking in Boy-O. Says the waif will be a gift to his lady." He smiled proudly, as if he'd just solved all the world's problems. "She won't marry him, you know."

Brigid sat back with a smile. Colin's wife died in childbirth. He'd also lost his son the same day and never remarried. After a decade of bachelorhood, he was on a merry chase after Fenella's maid. The woman, Rose, thought she was barren and refused to marry the Scot, sure he would want a family. Colin was resourceful, she'd give him that.

"Aye, and it might work. But I dinna think that's what ye had to tell

me.” *Or ask me*, she thought, as dragonfly wings battered her stomach.

He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, and sighed. The dancing flames sent ribbons of gold shimmering across his blond head. His linen shirt was open at the neck, cravat gone. She tried to keep her eyes on his face, but they strayed to the sandy curls covering his chest.

“It’s about my father.” He scrubbed his face with a palm and leaned back again. “He’s not.”

Brigid waited. She knew there had been something amiss with the relationship between him and the late viscount. And there was the eerie resemblance between him and Fenella. “It’s Sir Horace.” It hit her like a blustery north wind. The ball. Charles and Frank appearing, upset. Sir Horace following and leaving early, furious about something. “When did he find out?”

Frank told her of his mother’s confession, how his stepfather had found out just before he died, and his first trip to London to confront Franklin. She heard the animosity as he retold the painful story, the accusation in his voice. The hope and longing as he described meeting his half-sisters and later wondering if he’d ever be able to know them.

Her heart broke for him. It took all her reserve not to wrap him in a tight embrace before he finished. But he needed to share this weight, and her shoulders were strong and willing.

“I came face-to-face with him at White’s one evening. I was meeting Charles, and Sir Horace was there. He turned and we... stared at each other. Nothing was said. He just turned and walked away.”

“But he knew?”

Frank nodded. “How could he not? We’re like a reflection of one another.”

“Sir Horace is—”

“A good man, I know. I’ve been told several times.” His shoulders slumped. “I can’t force him to accept me, and I can’t maintain a friendship with my half-sisters, *his* daughters, if he doesn’t.”

“He will,” she soothed, standing to lean against the side of his chair. She smoothed back his thick hair and gingerly touched his eye. “Fenella and Evie will make sure of it. They care about you.”

“Fate smiled on me the day I met you in Hyde Park.” His hand reached up and stroked her arm.

“Now I ken what ye needed to tell me. What do ye need to ask?” Her pulse raced. *Please let it be a proposal*, her mind begged.

Frank pulled her into his lap. She wiggled her bottom against him, got comfortable, and put her arms around his neck.

"I love you, Brigid MacNaughton. You have a knack for chasing away the rain, and I can't imagine a life without you by my side. I've come to rely on the happiness you have given me these past weeks." He cleared his throat. "Will you marry me? Will you be my wife?"

"Yes." She pressed her lips to his. "Under one condition."

"Anything, my love." His fingers brushed her temple and threaded her hair. His thumb caressed her cheek, and she closed her eyes, distracted by his touch.

"You don't think any less of me because I'm a by-blow?" he asked, his breath hot against her ear.

"I'm happy our children will share Sir Horace's blood and no' the vile mon who raised ye." Her heart was spilling over with love for this man, for their future. She laid a palm on his face and kissed him. His unshaven jaw tickled her chin, and she rubbed her cheek against the roughness. Her fingers skimmed across his chest, feeling the soft skin beneath the coarse hair. Her lips moved to his neck. He sucked in a breath and growled softly.

His hand covered her breast, and she gasped. The familiar heat surged through her, the pulse between her legs growing.

"You had a stipulation?" he murmured. His other moved lower to cup her mons.

"We stop at Gretna Green on our way back to London. I'll be seeing my new home as Lady Raines."

His hand stilled.

Could he want a long engagement? Was it an English custom?

"And your family in the Highlands will agree?"

"We'll have a proper ceremony when we visit Dunderave." She nibbled on his ear. "They just worry about missing a good excuse for a *ceilidh*." She scraped the other lobe with her teeth. "We'll give them that."

His fingers pulled at the neckline of her gown and slid it over her shoulders until it pooled around her waist. The crowns of her breasts puckered, and she drew in a sharp breath as the pad of his thumb circled one. Then his tongue traced circles around each pink tip, and she could no longer think. His manhood stiffened against her bottom, and she wriggled against it.

Frank groaned and pulled up the hem of her shift. His fingers stroked her thighs, then slid between her soft folds. The pounding increased; heat flushed from her core to her neck, as he entered her with his fingers. He slipped in and out, creating a delicious friction, and she

fought not to cry out. She arched her hips into his hand, his thumb massaging that magical spot.

The ache increased. Her urgency rose as the sweet pressure became unbearable. And then she was spinning, falling, wave after wave of pleasure rocking her body. His mouth covered hers, muffling her cries, continuing his caresses until her tremors quieted.

She clung to him, panting, while he restored her shift to its proper places and held her close.

“A hearty yes to your one condition, my love. I believe Gretna Green would be the sensible thing to do.”

Chapter Fifteen

Two Shams, One Truth

One week later

Frank stretched his legs out on the blanket. They were enjoying the spring air, the view of the Clyde, and an afternoon alone. Brigid had wanted a picnic on Glasgow Green, and the weather had been perfect. Sunny, warm, and a slight breeze. A barge drifted past and birds chirped in the nearby copse.

They had made plans to leave at the end of the month. Evie was anxious to see her husband, and Brigid and Frank were ready to start their life together. He still needed to come to terms with his mother and Sir Horace. Together, the next meeting with his father might be easier to bear. Perhaps even enjoyable.

"Would yer mother have liked me?" she asked, hoping to lead him into a conversation about Lady Raines. She brushed grass from her lap and pulled the pale rose muslin over her knees as she drew them to her chest.

"Yes, and not just because you make me happy." He tucked a chestnut curl behind her ear. "She would have envied your strength and independence."

They sat in silence and watched another barge drift by.

"Do ye miss her?" she tried again.

"You know, I visited her grave every week until I came to London," he blurted. A rush of heat washed over his face and neck. Was he embarrassed for being a devoted son?

"There's nothing wrong with finding comfort that way." She turned to him and placed a hand on his cheek so she could see his eyes.

"That's part of it, I suppose. We only had each other for so long. But I went every Sunday, hoping that would be the day I could forgive her." He paused, the pain darkening his eyes, like frothy waves in a storm. "I loved her, will always love her. She was my mother. She sacrificed her happiness to protect me, shielded me from my father's vicious actions as best she could. I'll always be grateful but..."

"But ye canna grant her absolution?" Brigid asked. She swallowed, her throat thick as she blinked back the burning tears. How did one survive without family or clan? Without that sometimes smothering but always sincere, sometimes infuriating but always endearing, steady and unconditional love?

It was unimaginable.

It was something she had taken for granted.

He shook his head. "I can't understand why she'd keep such a secret from me. When my father was alive, her fear—for both of us—would have held her tongue. But we had half a dozen years after that." He ran a hand through his hair and gave a mirthless smile. "Years of doting on me, insisting I look like my grandfather, *her* father."

Brigid threaded her fingers through his, determined to mend this fracture in his life. "How would ye have reacted if she'd told ye? Would yer last years with her have been as sweet?"

"She should have trusted me with the truth." Frank's eyes locked with hers. "Worse than keeping the secret, she lied to me. You've seen Sir Horace Franklin. I'm his mirror image. *She gave me his blasted name.*"

Here was the wound, still festering. "Tell me, did ye gain confidence as soon as ye became the viscount, or did it take time?"

He laughed. "No, I was terrified at first. But I have an excellent steward, and he taught me well. It took several years to adapt to my new role."

"I'm sure yer mother saw that." Brigid thought about her own ma. "Sometimes a mother must do what's best for her child in a roundabout way. If she had told ye at first, how would that have affected yer view of yer title?"

He shrugged. "I would have been resentful, maybe even feel as if I didn't belong there." Understanding shone in his eyes. "Or didn't deserve it."

"Do ye belong there? Do ye deserve it?" she asked, already knowing his answer. His mother had been a wise woman. Her confession hadn't been to ease her conscience. It had been postponed until her son could deal with the revelation.

"I couldn't give up Castle Raygin or the land. It's mine, a part of me." He grunted. "You think she was justified, don't you?"

"Sometimes the end warrants the means. Secrets are heavy burdens, and she carried one most of her life. It must have been a terrible hardship." Brigid rose to her knees and kissed him softly. "I think yer mother survived living with a vicious mon so that her son would have a

good life. I canna judge her, for I dinna ken what I'd have done in her situation."

His palm stroked her cheek, and he brushed her lips. "I'll think about what you said."

"Sometimes ye need to make amends with the past in order to embrace the future."

"What wise man said that?" he asked, nipping her bottom lip.

She laughed. "Brigid MacNaughton."



Early May

Brigid hugged Gideon and her aunt, then turned to Lissie. "Ye ken I love ye like a sister." She looked over her shoulder at her English cousin and whispered, "And I see the affection in Gideon's eyes for ye."

"But I—"

"Deserve to be happy like the rest of us. Dinna close yer eyes to love because of loyalty or timing." She hugged Lissie. "Life is fragile, and we must grab whatever happiness fate sends our way."

The post-chaise had arrived, and the rest of the group waited outside to bid them farewell. "If you want to make Gretna Green before dark, we need to get going," called Evie.

Outside, she wrapped her arms around Lachlan and then Fenella. "Sister-in-law twice, I canna wait for ye to visit us at Raygin Castle. Ye can bring this bufflehead of a brother if ye choose. I'll not make it a requirement."

"Did I mention my Brownie is pregnant?" asked Lachlan, his brows raised. "If ye want one of the pups, ye best be nice to *me*!"

"Oh, Lachy! What a wonderful wedding present that would be."

"That's better." He grinned. "I promise ye first pick."

Next to Colin stood a petite, darkhaired woman, holding Boy-O's hand. She'd only met Fenella's maid briefly at Lachlan's wedding. Colin hovered over her with a lopsided smile on his face. She turned to the child, who beamed and clutched Brigid's legs. "You're my hero, Miss Brigid. If he wasn't marrying ye, I'd do it."

"And I'd accept," she said, squatting down and putting her arms around the thin shoulders. "But what about Rose and Colin?"

"Rose will be my ma," he said solemnly. "I canna marry my ma."

"Verra true." She kissed the lad's cheek and gave Colin a questioning

look. "Remember, Master MacNaughton sounds fierce, but he's jelly on the inside."

Colin grunted, then smothered her in a tight embrace. "It seems love is in the air, Cousin. Treat that poor mon well. He'll be earning every smile ye give him."

She punched his arm. "As will Rose. Does she ken what she's getting into?"

"I do," the woman said with a smile as Colin pulled her close to his side.

Frank appeared from the back of the house, leading two horses. "Is Barker riding with ye?" she asked. She was sure he'd want to sit on the back bench with Louella.

"He'll be with the ladies inside the coach," Frank answered with a grin.

"There's no room. How—"

"And you will ride sidesaddle with me." He handed her the reins. "No more secrets. Agreed?"

"Only if that includes no' keeping secrets about the secrets ye've been told." Brigid placed her hands on her hips, trying to act offended.

Lachlan had a sudden interest in the clouds that hung in an azure sky. Colin whistled and studied his boots.

"I have no idea what that meant, but I'll nod my head and agree if it will send us on our way." He cupped his hands and bent, waiting to help her mount. With a grin, she placed her boot in Frank's makeshift stirrup and hoisted herself onto the saddle.

The party exited to loud shouts of "goodbye," "write soon," and "Godspeed." Brigid drew in a deep breath. How funny life was. A few short months ago, she'd left MacNaughton Castle in tears. Now she was excited to start a new life, in England of all places. But it was close to the border and only two days from Glasgow. And tonight... Tonight she would lay with her husband. Francis, Lord Raines, the man who'd stolen her heart.

Brigid rearranged her knee around the hook of the side saddle, longing to ride astride. Patience would be her friend while Frank became accustomed to his irregular wife.

Ye'll surprise yerself at what ye're capable of for the right mon.

How wise her mother was. Brigid dug her heels into the horse's flanks and caught up with Frank, wondering how long she should wait before asking for a different saddle.

"Ah, there's my bonny pretender," he said with a wink and an

atrocious Scottish brogue. “And no argument about my new pet name for you, or I’ll change my mind about letting you ride bareback in front of the staff.”

She closed her mouth and beamed at him. He’d played a charlatan himself. Two shams that created one truth.

Saints and sinners! Fate had a sense of humor.

Chapter Sixteen

Reunions, Redemption, Repentance

Late May 1820

Raygin Castle, northern England

Brigid blinked at the bright early morning sun invading their bed chamber. She rolled over to face Frank. He lay next to her, propped up on his elbow, staring at her with smoky eyes. "What are ye looking at? I must be a sight."

"I can't think of anything more beautiful to wake up to each morning." He reached out and brushed a stray lock over her shoulder. Leaning forward, he brushed her lips. "Good morning, Wife. I hope you're not in a hurry."

"It depends on what ye had in mind." She grinned, thinking that this morning ritual was as satisfying as watching the sun rise in the Highlands. It would also put her husband in a better frame of mind when she told him about the guest arriving today.

Frank pulled the sheet down, exposing her breasts and the pink tips. His head lowered and took the one, then the other in his mouth. In response, her hand reached out and grasped his thick member, already stiff with need. She ran her thumb over the tip, smiling at his deep groan.

"You're a shameless vixen."

"Would ye like me to stop?"

"If you don't, I won't finish what I've started," he answered. "And we both know what a disappointment that would be."

Brigid continued her strokes, moving her palm up and down the satiny rod. Frank's lips moved down her stomach, his tongue stopping at her belly button as his fingers brushed the curls between her legs. A finger slid between her folds, moving up and down the slickness, over that sensitive, magical spot. She fell back against the bolsters and let him have his way. Brigid let out a soft whimper as his body shifted, moved lower, and his tongue replaced his finger.

She clutched his hair as he licked and sucked, one hand reaching up

to continue his caresses of her breast. This man knew her body better than she did. His hands and mouth played her like a fine musical instrument, coaxing her into a soft, melodic introduction, continuing the undulating crescendo until she reached a mind-numbing, shattering conclusion. Heat spread through her core and into her limbs, and when his fingers entered her, her hips rose to accept them. The delicious friction sent shivers of pleasure through her.

"You are my favorite breakfast, you know," he mumbled against her folds.

Brigid opened her mouth to answer, but his thumb began circling her swollen nub, and desire stole any thoughts she might have had. Her muscles tensed, the sensuous pressure building until she cried out, her body arching. Waves of bliss washed over her, tremors stealing all strength from her limbs. Her pulse raced; she panted and pulled his head up.

"I need ye inside me, Frank." With her heart pounding against her chest, she wrapped her legs around him as his body settled on top of hers. "Saints and sinners, but I love waking up with ye."

Frank covered her mouth with his, his manhood sliding up and down in her wetness, then entering her in one clean stroke. He filled her, and her muscles closed around him, hips moving in rhythm with his. He groaned, moving in and out of her slowly, his eyes closed. Desire built again, and she felt the familiar sweet tensing of her core. His thrusts came faster and faster, until he froze, hovering above her, and cried out. She shuddered beneath him, joining him in a final tremor of ecstasy.



"I love you, Brigid," he murmured into her neck as he collapsed on top of her. She was sublime, and he wanted to stay inside her for the rest of the day. Forever.

Her breath was warm against his shoulder and her hands moved up and down, massaging his back and shoulders. He sighed. Never had he imagined that life could be so happy. So satisfying. Frank grinned at that last thought.

"What are ye smiling about?" she whispered in his ear before nibbling his lobe. "Do ye find our lovemaking humorous?"

"Ha! I was thinking I'm the luckiest man in England."

"I hope ye think so when I tell ye about the guest coming later today."

He lifted off her, just enough to see her face. *Blast!* He knew that look in her sparkling blue eyes. And he knew he wouldn't like what she was about to tell him. With another sigh, he rolled onto his back and pulled the sheet over them. "You might as well tell me. I can already see I won't like it."

She cupped his cheek in her palm and leaned up to place a tender kiss on his lips. "As ye ken, Lord Brecken was to fetch Evie this week."

Apprehension clenched his stomach. "And?"

"He isna able to come, and ye were unable to bring her back to London. She canna return alone."

"So, *you* want to go with her to London?" he asked. "I thought you didn't care if you ever returned to Town."

"I prefer the country and our braw estate. I didna think I'd be happy anywhere but the Highlands, but I fell in love with Castle Raygin and the grounds almost as quickly as I fell for you." She kissed him again, her finger tracing circles on his chest. "Instead of her husband, Evie's father will arrive today to escort her home."

Frank stilled. "Sir Horace is coming here?"

She nodded. "Before ye start ranting—"

"You rant, I do not." His jaw clenched as he thought of the imminent confrontation. "If he didn't want to acknowledge me, why in the hell would he come to my estate?"

"He never said that. He said he needed time," Brigid reminded him. "I believe he wants to talk with his son."

Frank grunted. "We'll see. I don't appreciate my wife and sister plotting behind my back."

"We did no such thing. Lord Brecken arranged it with Sir Horace. Evie only learned of the change in plans when she received her husband's correspondence."

"Which arrived when?"

He had to grin at the guilt that flooded her face.

"A week ago?" she answered as if unsure. "We worried if ye found out too soon, ye might make arrangements to be gone when he arrived."

Frank nodded. "I might have." He closed his eyes, enjoying the feel of Brigid's fingers running through his hair. "I don't know what my reaction will be if he rejects me this time. In truth, I don't care as long as I have my loving wife. You make my life bright, a blue sky with no clouds on the horizon."

"If the two of ye canna come to terms, I will never ask this of ye again. But remember, he will be grandfather to our children." She held

his face in her hands. "I want them to know *all* of their family."

He couldn't fault her reasoning and hoped she was right. He'd suffered so much as a child, endured his stepfather's belittling, that he hesitated to give his real father the opportunity to strike him down again. Yet, Brigid had some kind of internal magic, some secret whisper that seemed to always turn his world right side up. She'd already helped him come to terms with his mother's actions. The knot no longer formed in his stomach when he visited her grave. Brigid accompanied him each Sunday; they spoke of his childhood and the time after his stepfather's death, worked through the haunting childhood memories. As the weeks progressed, he found the warmth and affection returning as he remembered his mother. His wife had much to do with it.

Ye canna embrace the future until ye accept the past, she had told him the first time they'd gone to the cemetery together. He supposed that included confronting his father.

"I have to go into the village today. I should be back late this afternoon." He sat up and swung his legs over the mattress. "Will you accompany me?"

"May I ride astride?"

"Don't you always?" He laughed, surprised the tension in his gut was already easing.

"Aye, but I always ask." She rose on her knees and stretched, her peaks still swollen and pushing through her nightrail.

Frank put his hands on the mattress and leaned over to kiss each one through the thin fabric. "True, but what would happen if I said no?"

"Do ye want to find out, mon?" she challenged, a glint in her eye as she twisted her thick auburn curls into a knot on her head.

He barked out a laugh. "No, I don't believe I do, Lady Raines."



Frank handed off the reins to the stableboy. Brigid had decided not to accompany him, worried she wouldn't be home to receive their guest. "Have any visitors arrived?"

"Aye, my lord. A gentleman rode in about an hour ago."

Hell and damnation. He'd hoped something had delayed or canceled Sir Horace's trip. There was nothing for it. He entered the house, and the butler informed him there was a visitor in the drawing room. Frank went to his quarters and changed from his riding clothes. He didn't know if this meeting would be short or drawn out, so he'd best refresh

himself first.

Dressed in a somber brown coat and fawn trousers, Frank stood outside the door. Evie and Brigid's laughter floated through the oak door. A deep voice, and another bout of laughter. He straightened his shoulders, took a deep breath, and entered the room. The silence was immediate, and three pairs of eyes focused on him.

It was a jolt to see Sir Horace again. Silver eyes studied him, then the man rose and came forward, his hand out.

"Lord Raines, may I thank you for your hospitality?" Sir Horace smiled, his tone sincere.

"It's my pleasure," Frank responded without thinking.

He took his father's right hand in a firm grip and they shook. The older man's left hand covered Frank's also, and they stood there awkwardly. When Frank pulled his hand back, Sir Horace blinked, his eyes shining. Frank swallowed the lump in his throat, wondering at the emotion swirling through him. This first handshake was more affection than his stepfather had ever shown him. The mere act of Franklin adding both hands to their handshake had made the act more personal, more intimate than any interaction with the late viscount. He blew out a breath, and his gaze searched out Brigid.

"We were just learning of Mr. Wilkens' latest adventure," his wife said, laughing. "It seems a lady has him practicing poetry and attending Almack's."

This was a humorous distraction. "Charles? Are we speaking of the same man who told me a few months ago that marriage was a plague to be avoided?"

"The same fickle man, indeed," verified Evie. She stood and smoothed her apricot muslin. "Well, I must begin packing. We'll be leaving in a few days, and I don't want to forget anything."

"I promised to help you," added Brigid, jumping to her feet. She reached up on her tiptoes and kissed Frank's cheek, then whispered in his ear, "I'll stay if ye prefer."

He shook his head, tempted, but smiled. "I'll see you before dinner."

The silence screamed around them after the ladies left the room. Sir Horace resumed his chair in front of the hearth. Frank took the chair opposite him. How did they approach this... topic? Two men who had not known of the other's existence until the past year, now thrown together by the confession of a dying woman. Both had been her world at one time. The elder represented her dashed hopes of a bright future. The younger had been her sole reason for surviving a cruel marriage.

“I—”

“We sh—”

They both spoke at once. Frank nodded to indicate Sir Horace continue.

“Your estate is impressive.”

“Thank you. I’m happy here.”

More silence. *Bloody hell!* “Why did you come?” It was out. Not the most diplomatic beginning, but a beginning.

“I wanted to see what you’d done here.”

“You wanted to see if I needed your money.” He wasn’t going to mince words. This was his house, and he would take the lead. There would be no strategic back-and-forth while they stumbled through this subject. “And as you see, I don’t.”

Perhaps this visit would help after all. By touring the grounds, it would be obvious that Frank had little to gain by pursuing their relationship. Except a family. A grandfather for his future children.

“Your attitude will not make this any easier.” Sir Horace ran a hand through his silver-blond hair. “If we can be civil—”

“My attitude?” Frank tried to tap down the temper growing in his chest. He’d been the epitome of patience. Well, he’d remained calm and hid his irritation and growing anxiety. What more did the man expect of him under these unusual circumstances?

“You’re defensive. It won’t help matters.”

“You come into *my* home and comment on *my* attitude? *Who do you think you are?*” His voice rose as control slipped away. Frank hated the tightness in his chest, the heat of anger flooding his face. He sucked in a breath and ground his teeth.

“*Your father!*” Sir Horace yelled back.

It was like a douse of cold water. *Your father.* The words slowly sank in. The older man had just admitted their kinship. He closed his eyes and drew in deep breath. His lungs filled, then he blew the air out slowly. Words formed in his brain, but his mouth refused to open.

“I’m sorry. This is difficult for both of us.” Sir Horace ran a hand over his face, the creases around his eyes and mouth deep. “Can we try again?”

Frank nodded. He didn’t trust himself to speak. After convincing himself that life with Brigid was enough, that he didn’t need approval from this man, Frank realized it had been a lie. Emotion swelled in his throat again at Sir Horace’s admission and the possibilities that opened.

“As you can imagine, you were quite a surprise. I had no idea.” Sir

Horace chuckled with a half-smile. "Looking at myself thirty years ago scared the bloody hell out of me."

Frank nodded again. A slight smile curved his own lips, remembering that night in London and the jolt through his body when he'd first seen an older version of himself.

"And there were others to consider. Fenella, Evie... my wife. She's a good woman, but not always amenable." He cleared his throat. "Lady Franklin surprised me, though, insisting I make amends."

Frank's head jerked up and met his father's eyes. "She did?"

Sir Horace nodded. "As did both my daughters."

"I'm very fond of your daughters. They are warm, intelligent women."

They both sat, staring at their boots.

"She was my first love, you know," ventured Sir Horace, his voice thick. "I would have done anything for her."

"But you didn't have a title."

"It seems to be the curse of my existence when it comes to women," he agreed with a laugh. "If I'd known she was pregnant, I'd have abducted her and married her in Scotland."

"That's why she never told you." Frank saw the shift in the older man's expression. The memories that offered both pleasure and pain. "She wanted to protect us both."

"I always hoped she was happy with her choice. I didn't like the man, and I hated him after their marriage. But I never wanted her to suffer. It breaks my heart to think of what she endured." He looked up at his son. "What *you* endured."

"I came out stronger for it. And if it helps, her last years were happy and peaceful." Frank let out another long breath, feeling the tension in his shoulders lessen. "Are you here to offer an olive branch and set terms for our relationship?"

"I came for answers. In my eyes, our relationship is established. You're my son. After I accepted that, the circumstances were irrelevant." He shook his head. "Why didn't she tell us?"

Frank grunted. "Evie says she was thinking of us. We would have never formed a bond between us if she had been in the center. I would have resented another man in her life. You would have resented another man raising your son."

"But in the end, she knew we needed each other."

Frank drew in a breath. He locked his gaze with his father. "Do we?"

Sir Horace leaned his elbows on his knees and nodded. "I indulge my

wife, too much, I fear. I love her, but your mother was the love of my life.” His voice cracked. “You are the product of that love. How can I not embrace your existence? How can I not appreciate this unexpected gift?”

They both cleared their throats in the awkward silence. Frank blinked as an unfamiliar emotion overwhelmed him. Happiness? Relief? It didn’t matter. The resentment was fading; the loneliness that had dogged him his entire life dissipated like a fast-moving storm over the moors.

Sir Horace stood. “If it would be convenient, I’d like to stay a few weeks. See your estate, get to know each other. We may have more in common than we know.”

Frank stood, a peculiar lightness in his heart. “I’d like that. We can keep this quiet and stay out of the *on dits*.”

“I don’t give a damn what the *beau monde* says. I have a son.” Sir Horace slapped Frank on the back, then gripped his shoulder and yelled, “I have a son!”

The door flew open, and Evie and Brigid rushed in. Evie hugged her father. “And I have a brother!”

Frank put his arm around Brigid’s waist and pulled her close, kissing the top of her head.

“And ye have a father,” she said, leaning her head against his arm.

He nodded. A year ago, who would have thought he would be standing in his home with a loving wife, a doting sister, and his father? His real father.

Life was a strange mix of twists and turns. With Brigid by his side, the future suddenly looked bright. All the scenes he’d imagined as a boy, now possible. For the first time in his life, Frank felt blessed and utterly happy.

“Thank you,” he whispered in Brigid’s ear.

“For what, love?” she asked.

“For climbing trees, and shooting men, and saving boys, and loving me.”

Epilogue

Five years later

The wood behind Castle Raygin

The pounding hammer echoed against the pines. “Done,” announced Frank to the blonde boy next to him. “You have to be careful and not let your sister climb this alone.”

“I promise, Father,” the young Horace said solemnly, before scurrying up the ladder into the tree house. “I don’t think any girls should be allowed in here.”

His son had shared his love for the wood, and Brigid had suggested a little hideaway for the children. It was quiet and peaceful here, but no longer lonely.

A toddling blonde girl pulled at his trousers. “Up, Papa. Up.” He bent down and scooped up the child, turning to call for his wife.

Brigid lumbered between the pines, her hands holding her swollen belly, but there was a smile on her face. “Now ye have a place to hide when ye rile my temper.”

“You can’t get angry enough to keep me from our bed.” He laughed. “I hope this one is a girl that is the image of her mother. I want red curls and freckles on her nose.”

“I want her out so I can ride my pony again!” Brigid chortled. “Grandda will arrive with Ma and Grandma tomorrow. They insist on being here for the birth.”

“Thank God. They put my qualms to rest when the babe comes.”

“That’s the scotch Grandda feeds ye, so ye dinna hear my screams of pain.”

“You know my father and stepmother will also appear at our door soon enough. He won’t be bested by your family.” He laughed. “Sir Horace insists on knowing his grandchildren as well as he does his own children.”

“Yer father is so verra proud of ye, Frank. It warms my heart every time I see ye both together. Ye have so much in common, including some of the same mannerisms.”

“I have you to thank for that.”

She snorted. “Ye werena so grateful that first day he arrived, but I ken the two of ye had to meet.”

He put his free arm around Brigid, his daughter wiggling in the other. Every time he thought he couldn’t get any happier, fate proved him wrong. A third child on the way, doting grandparents on both sides, and sisters who visited as often as possible. He still visited his mother’s grave, but it had turned into a picnic lunch each Sunday when the weather permitted. There were times he felt his mother smiling down at him. He rubbed Brigid’s belly. He was still learning new snippets about her after years of marriage.

Life would never be dull with this woman. With a full heart, he smiled. He’d never be able to give back as much as he’d received, but he would happily spend the rest of his life trying.

To think this perfect union had begun with two people pretending to be someone else. His bonny pretender who had made him face the truth. The truth—and the indominable, flabbergasting, enticing Brigid MacNaughton—had set him free, given him love, and surrounded him with the family he’d only dreamed of as a boy.

THE END

About the Author

Bestselling and award-winning author Aubrey Wynne is an elementary teacher by trade, champion of children and animals by conscience, and author by night. She resides in the Midwest with her husband, dogs, horses, mule, and barn cats. Obsessions include wine, history, travel, trail riding, and all things Christmas. Her books have received the Golden Quill, Aspen Gold, Heart of Excellence, and the Gayle Wilson Award of Excellence.

Aubrey's first love is medieval romance but after dipping her toe in the Regency period in 2018 with the *Wicked Earls' Club*, she was smitten. This inspired her spin-off series *Once Upon a Widow*. In 2020, she will launch the Scottish Regency series *A MacNaughton Castle Romance* with Dragonblade Novels.

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